

HETAG Newsletter No. 51, September 2021



Crescenciano Garza Rivera *An Afternoon With the Houston Artists*, 1928

Another fall is almost upon us, the second of the pandemic, though I'm sure I don't need to remind HETAGers of that. Back at the beginning of summer we'd thought that life was about to get back to "normal," whatever that will be when it finally does get here. In July, many of us even attended the first in-person HETAG meeting in over a year, our special HETAG gathering with [Erik Sprohge](#) to celebrate his career retrospective exhibition at Watercolor Art Society-Houston. How exhilarating, and comforting, it was to be together in the gallery, looking at amazing art, with the artist and other HETAGers, all vaccinated and unmasked.

Alas, it was a little too soon for us to take such gatherings for granted again. It's starting to look as though, to paraphrase, "we'll always have virtual." But that's not all bad, as you'll see from the announcement about the upcoming CASETA: Center for the Advancement and Study of Early Texas Art Virtual Fall Forum later in this issue of the newsletter. In just a little more than a week, we can all join in a full day+ of Early Texas Art Talks, private collection home tours – even a cocktail hour – and it's all free with registration (BYOB)!

And then there is the wealth of virtual offerings that focus on Early Texas Art, from [HETAG](#), [CASETA](#), [TACO: Texas Art Collectors Organization](#), the [San Antonio Art Museum](#) and other museums and organizations around the state. These virtual events often have a far greater reach than in-person events ever can – in terms of permanence, of course, since they are recorded and available on-demand – but also in terms of geography. I've already heard from folks who will be joining the CASETA Virtual Fall Forum from around the United States, and from as far away as Europe. We can legitimately say that now the attention of the WORLD is focusing on Early Texas Art. That's not a bad thing, even if it has been spurred by what we've thought of as pandemic limitations. So, for now, and for a while more at least. See you online!

HETAG: The Houston Earlier Texas Art Group

Houston Art History Notes: The Mystery of Myrtle

Who doesn't like a good mystery? And when the mystery includes beautiful paintings, issues with a contemporary timeliness, and is rooted in the people and history of our very own city! Well, it's irresistible.



Leila McConnell *Myrtle*, 1952 (c); flanked by Erik Sprohge *Myrtle* 1950 (two drawings)

Such is the MYSTERY OF MYRTLE – Who was she? What was her story? What can she teach us about the history of our city and our art?

These are the clues: For a few years around 1950 – perhaps 1948-1952 – a black Houston woman named Myrtle worked as a model at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts (later renamed the Glassell School). Many students in the school painted and drew her. Images of Myrtle by four different artists are included here. There are others, probably many others, and it's clear that Myrtle had a significant impact on the training and development of young Houston artists of the time, and thus of later Houston art as well.

For all that impact, however, little is known about Myrtle. She was black, and, since the Museum School was racially segregated at the time, all those for whom she modeled there were white. There would likely have been little interaction between model and artists outside the studio. The few artists still living who painted and drew her remember her vividly as a model – but do not remember (or maybe never knew) much else. No one remembers her last name. Museum records of models at the time do not appear to exist. Myrtle was said to be a single mother with a daughter, but that's a memory now 70 years old. It's reported that Lowell Collins, then director of the school, likened her to "water pouring from a glass" because of her ability to assume any pose requested.



Kathryn Mayo *Myrtle* nd (l); Leila McConnell *Myrtle with Pansies* 1948 (c); Henri Gadbois *Myrtle* 1952 (r)

The mystery of Myrtle brings to mind the 2020 exhibition at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, [Boston's Apollo: Thomas McKeller and John Singer Sargent](#). Like Myrtle, Thomas McKeller was black and an artist's muse – in his case, muse to one of the most important American artists of all time, John Singer Sargent. Sargent drew and painted him numerous times – including his now famous nude portrait in the collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. He even

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incorporated McKeller's image into some of his most significant public works, such as the rotunda murals of the Museum, though there Sargent turned McKeller from black to white.



John Singer Sargent *Nude Study of Thomas E. McKeller* 1917-20 (l); *Chiron and Achilles* 1921, McKeller was the model for both figures (c); figure study for MFA mural, nd. (r)

Even though Thomas McKeller's image was among the most visible in American art, until the Gardner exhibition almost nothing was known about him. He had tremendous impact, but he did not have the dignity of his own public personhood. Such is presently the lot of Myrtle.

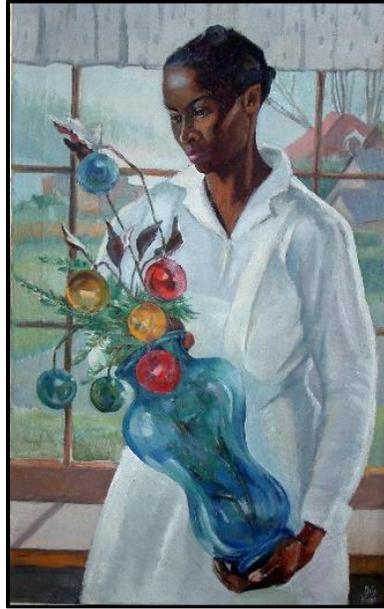
Myrtle and Thomas McKeller are not alone in their plight. Another recent exhibition, this one titled [*Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet to Matisse to Today*](#), in 2018/19 at the Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, explores the essential use of the black body in modern art, usually by white artists, while the depicted black person all too often remained unacknowledged, even unknown.



Frédéric Bazille, *Young Woman with Peonies*, 1870; Henri Matisse, *Dame à la robe blanche* (Woman in white), 1946 (r)

Since Myrtle was not the only black Houston woman of her era (and earlier) who modeled without much credit, it would be possible to curate an exhibition inspired by *Posing Modernity* but drawn from Houston art. And it would be a beautiful, as well as an eye-opening exhibition about the contributions black models, particularly black women models, have made to art in our city. It would remind us that segregation placed these women in a position that sometimes gave them little choice as to whether or not their images would be made. And it would also remind us that even when they were not necessarily completely free to decide (Myrtle presumably was, but Arie, Florence and others, below, perhaps were not), their essential dignity could not be denied in the images that resulted (though there is no evidence that the white artists consciously intended to deny that dignity, even as they participated in the social structure that prevailed in Houston at the time.)

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Belle Heaps Aree 1930s

Belle Heaps was a serious and talented, though never professional, artist. She studied with Robert Joy and other faculty at the school of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, during the 1930s. Her husband was Claude W. Heaps, long-time Physics professor at Rice Institute (later renamed Rice University). According to the artist's son, Aree worked for some years as maid to the family when he was young. He remembered a visit his family made to the farm of Aree's family north of Houston, recalling her father showed his father around the farm with pride, and that her mother served a meal to his family in the farmhouse. He also remembered that his mother offered the finished portrait as a gift to Aree, and that Aree declined. He speculated that Aree did not accept the gift because she did not want a depiction of herself in a maid's uniform, a speculation not based on any explicit comment from Aree that he recalled. After 80 years, he also did not recall Aree's last name.



John Clark Tidden *Florence, Bobby's Nurse* c1925 (l); *Bobby* c1925 (r)

Shortly after Tidden did this painting of Florence, he and his wife, Agnes Lilienberg Tidden (later Muench) divorced, and he left Houston to return to New York City. The pencil portrait of Bobby remains with family, but the current location of *Florence* is unknown, as is the identity of Florence, though the portrait won Tidden top prize for the "best figure piece or portrait" in the 1926 Annual Exhibition of the Southern States Art League, presented by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

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Grace Spaulding John *The Serving Maid* (l); *Maid's Night Out* (c); *Tuesday* (r)

Grace Spaulding John often depicted black women models in paintings made in Houston and Galveston, as she did native Americans when she worked in New Mexico, and Mexicans during her frequent trips to Mexico. Though some of the paintings might be thought of as portraits, more often they were genre works, and none reveal the name of the model.



Emma Richardson Cherry *Deep South* c1937 (Bryan Museum); Sano di Pietro *Virgin and Child with Saints Jerome and Bernardino of Siena and Six Angels* c1460 (Museum of Fine Arts, Houston)

For her *Deep South*, Emma Richardson Cherry posed a black mother and her new son in an idealized Eden based on the garden of the Cherry home. Clearly Cherry refers to the long tradition of Madonna and Child paintings in European (especially Italian) art, with which she was very familiar, intending to adapt that iconography to create a Madonna and Child for the Gulf Coast. In a somewhat bold gesture for the time and place, she makes her Madonna and Infant Christ black. She would also have been familiar of the frequent convention of depicting the Child holding fruit, and so she shows her black Christ child also holding fruit. In the European renditions of this subject, the type of fruit varies, depending on the symbolic message intended, and, to some extent, on the relation of the fruit to a specific location. For her rendition, Cherry chooses a banana, in keeping with the banana leaves framing her black Madonna, which, no doubt, grew in the Cherry garden. Whether or not she was conscious of the problematic note she injects by introducing the banana in her composition – otherwise an audacious adaptation of a sacred convention in art to her own culture and geography – is unclear. She had seen Josephine Baker dance her famous Banana Dance in Paris in 1925, and would likely have seen the racist images linking caricatured blacks and bananas then current in America. But there is nothing to suggest that she intended such a racist trope in this major work which borrows on a sacred visual tradition in art. It is likely that the black woman model was a domestic employee of the Cherry family, and her infant son.

Had these images of black Houstonians been created by black artists, we would likely find them beautiful, rather than beautiful but possibly troubling. Since they were created by white artists, however, questions of appropriation and possible coercion arise – questions that almost certainly did not arise for their creators, and perhaps not consciously even for the models themselves. They are still beautiful, but with the newly raised awareness of the Black Lives Matter movement (newly raised for most white viewers, anyway), these works may have more to teach us about seeing art of the past – and the present – than we would have imagined even a few years ago. And they certainly make us want to know more about the women who sat for them.

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[Free registration now open.](#)

Friday, October 1

6:30 p.m. 2021 Fall Forum Opening Remarks & Toast to CASETA: Texas Cocktails with Texas Ingredients with Howard Taylor (CASETA Executive Director) & Scott Chase (Chair, CASETA Board of Directors)

6:45 p.m. Virtual Tour of African American Artists in Texas: Selections from the John L. Nau III Collection of Texas Art by Christopher Beer (Nau Collection Curator) & Danielle Burns Wilson (Project Row Houses Curator and Art Director)

Saturday, October 2

10 a.m. Jerry Bywaters: Then...and Now by Francine Carraro, Ph.D. (retired director of the Wichita Falls Museum of Art) & Ellen Buie Niewyk (retired curator of Bywaters Special Collections, Hamon Arts Library, Southern Methodist University)

11 a.m. 'A Magnanimous Gift to Man': The Life and Sculpture of Octavio Medellin by Dr. Mark A. Castro (Jorge Baldor Curator of Latin American Art, Dallas Museum of Art)

12 p.m. Lunch Hour Chats about Texas Art featuring Stephen Alton (Early Texas Art Collector), Lynn Castle (Executive Director, Art Museum of Southeast Texas, Beaumont) & Noe Perez (Texas Artist)

1 p.m. Finding Texas Art: A Spotlight on Dealers, Galleries and Auction Houses

2 p.m. The Coming, Going, and Staying of Early Galveston Artists by Pat Jakobi (Author, *Early Galveston Artists and Photographers: Recovering a Legacy*)

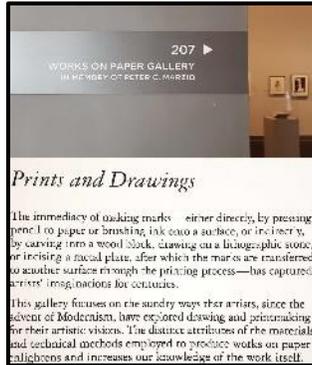
3 p.m. Texas Art at Home: A Tour with Three Houston Collectors featuring Tam Kiehnhoff, Stan Price & Randy Tibbits

4 p.m. Closing Remarks & 2022 Symposium Preview with Howard Taylor (CASETA Executive Director) & Scott Chase (Chair, CASETA Board of Directors)

HETAG is a Gold Level Sponsor of the CASETA Virtual Fall Forum, thanks to these HETAGers: Larry & Cindy Burns, Jim & Jackie Colthart, Linda East, Jo Frances Greenlaw, Brad Harmes, Michelle Johnson, Rex Koontz, Gus & Sharon Kopriva, Lisa Lipscomb, Karen Lund & Jack DeMoss, Larry Martin, Sarah Beth Wilson & Joseph McKeel, Margaret O'Brien-Nelson, Stan Price, Shirley Rose, Kay Sheffield, Mary Ellen & Tom Whitworth. Other HETAGers are [individual listed sponsors](#), and you can be too, [at this link](#). Your support helps CASETA and HETAG spread the word about EARLY TEXAS ART.

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Bravo Prints & Drawings Department, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston!



It's been almost 10 months since the opening of the Kinder Building at Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. In the recent rehang of the Prints & Drawings Galleries – necessary because the works are sensitive to light and can't be on view for long periods – Curator Dena Woodall has included a nice selection of outstanding works by Earlier Houston Artists. And the descriptions of the works let viewers know that the artists worked right here in Houston – important for visitors to MFAH, both locals and out-of-towners, to know: the works are OUR art made by OUR artists right here in OUR city! And they're just as worth seeing in OUR museums as all those (also fabulous) pieces bought&brought from elsewhere! The pieces will be up for a while, but not forever, since they'll need time to rest eventually, so don't wait to go see them.



<p>Lee Krasner American, 1908–1984</p> <p>Untitled, 1941</p> <p>Gouache and graphite on wove paper</p> <p><i>Bequest of William Woodford, 2020.482</i></p> <p>Lee Krasner was among the few women artists accepted into the male-dominated Eighth Street Club, formed in 1949, as a social and intellectual meeting place for Abstract Expressionists.</p> <p>Early in her career, Krasner worked in the mural division of the Works Progress Administration, largely facilitating the projects of other artists. During this period, she created a number of gouache sketches for imagined abstract murals of her own, filled with bright colors and geometric forms. <i>Untitled</i> was one such sketch, created around the time she was commissioned to produce an ultimately unrealized mural at WNYC Studios, home of New York Public Radio.</p>	<p>Robert Ormerod Preusser American, 1919–1992</p> <p>Composition No. 1, 1940</p> <p>Casein, tempera, ink, wax crayon and graphite on wove paper</p> <p><i>1940 Annual Houston Artists Exhibition, museum purchase prize, 1940.49.212</i></p> <p>Houston-based artist Robert Preusser is often regarded as the first Texas Modernist. <i>Composition No. 1</i> was executed while he studied at the newly established Institute of Design, Chicago under László Moholy-Nagy and György Kepes—both formerly of the Bauhaus, the famed German design school. This abstract drawing is from a series that received the purchase prize at the <i>Sixtieth Annual Exhibition of Works by Houston Artists</i> in 1940, thus becoming the first nonobjective work purchased by the MFAH. The play between translucency and opacity in <i>Composition No. 1</i> connects to Moholy-Nagy's <i>Pluvialis Space Modulator</i>, which modulate light and create a sense of movement.</p> <p><i>László Moholy-Nagy, Space Modulator, 1929–31, oil and enamel on Plexiglas, Soluna B. Guggenheim Museum, New York</i></p>
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The installation includes this exciting pairing of 1940s works by Robert Preusser (r), Houston Modernist par excellence, and Lee Krasner (l), New York Abstract Expressionist. As the wall text explains, Preusser made this work while studying with László Moholy-Nagy and György Kepes at the Institute of Design (The New Bauhaus) in Chicago; and that, as the 1940 MFAH Purchase Prize winner, this and two companion pieces entered the permanent collection – the first nonobjective works purchased by the Museum.

What the wall text doesn't mention is that in 1939, when the 20 year old Robert's Houston teacher, Ola McNeill Davidson, took him to Chicago to enroll in the school, Moholy-Nagy and the other faculty members looked at his work, done in Houston, and were, according to Davidson, writing in a September 1939 letter to her own teacher and colleague, Emma Richardson Cherry, "all fascinated and filled with wonderment – What, from Texas? I told Moholy, 'art was from the by ways and not the highways' he caught me, repeated it and said, 'I like that.'" Another of Preusser's New Bauhaus instructors, seeing that early work, said that they could "teach him nothing in painting but that they could instruct him in the science of the new vision." Not bad for a 20-year old kid from Houston!

When Preusser returned to Houston after his studies in Chicago, and then military service in World War II, he brought the Bauhaus philosophy with him – with profound impacts on the Houston arts community in the late 1940s and early 1950s – especially the Contemporary Arts Association (later CAMH), which he helped found in 1948. How exciting it is to see work by this seminal Houston artist on view at MFAH for the first time in decades. Am I wrong in saying that it leaves us wanting MORE?

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Richard Gordon Stout
American, 1934–2020
Printed by **Penny Cerling** and
Marco Villegas at **Penny Cerling Studios**,
Houston

Untitled, from *Untitled Suite of Five*, 1993

Drypoint and aquatint on wove paper,
edition 3/10

Gift of Elizabeth McBride, 96.996.2

Richard Gordon Stout moved to Houston in 1977 after graduating from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He pursued abstraction at a time when representation was still predominant in the city. Stout achieves great depth of tone within his successive layers of aquatint to create shifting planes as lines lyrically move across the surface.

Richard Gordon Stout
American, 1934–2020
Printed by **Penny Cerling** and
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Houston

Untitled, from *Untitled Suite of Five*, 1993

Drypoint and aquatint on wove paper,
edition 3/10

Gift of Elizabeth McBride, 96.996.3

Richard Stout, Two drypoint and aquatint prints, 1993



John Biggers
American, 1924–2001

Untitled Sketchbook, c. 1943–45
Bound sketchbook with graphite,
watercolor and pastel on wove paper
with printed paper board cover and
cloth spine

*Museum purchased funded by the Caroline
Wiley Lane Acquisitions Endowment Fund,
2017.227*

John Biggers was a muralist and printmaker nationally recognized for his lifelong commitment to depicting the lives and culture of African Americans, as well as his unwavering dedication to art education and empowering generations of Houston artists.

Biggers once said, "it is drawing that I love to do most." This sketchbook was made in the early 1940s, from his entrance into Hampton Institute and through his discharge from the U.S. Navy. It contains preparatory drawings for some paintings dated to this period. Here the artist documents the hardships of domestic and wage labor in an era of legalized racial segregation in the rural South.

John Biggers, Sketchbook, c. 1943-1945



Dorothy Hood
American, 1918–2000

Bell Plant, c. 1960s–1970s

Ink on wove paper

Bequest of Mrs. Eleanor Freed Stern, 93.176

Texas-born Dorothy Hood became an instructor at the Museum School (now the Glassell School of Art) and influenced a generation of artists in Houston. Hood established herself as a notable artist through drawing. Beginning in the 1950s she depicted nature, before moving onto more abstract imagery. Hood's command of line as a descriptive force is evident in this portrayal of a bellflower—a woodland flower indigenous to North America. The artist is perhaps referencing Native American traditions that she much admired, for this flower was utilized for medicinal purposes.

Dorothy Hood, Bell Plant, c. 1960s-1970s

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Exhibitions of Interest:



Willie Moore *Fabric of Life* 2000, The John L. Nau III Collection of Texas Art

[African American Artists in Texas:](#)

**Selections from the John L. Nau III Collection of Texas Art
On view at the African American Library at the Gregory School
September 9, 2021 - March 12, 2022**

Spanning over six decades of cultural production, this exhibition presents paintings, drawings and prints of works by African Americans in Texas with a combination of portraiture, landscape and abstraction on display. In collaboration with the John L. Nau III Collection of Texas Art, this exhibition features works from Texan artists including John Willard Banks, John Biggers, Sedrick Huckaby, and Kermit Oliver, supplemented with special collection materials from the African American Library at the Gregory School.



[Deborah Colton Gallery](#)

[Bert L. Long, Jr.: *The Strength is from Within*](#)

and

[Jesse Lott: *Sense of Spirit*](#)

September 25, 2021 to November 20, 2021

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College Station, Texas



J. Wayne Stark Galleries
Memorial Student Center, MSC 1110
Texas A&M University, College Station

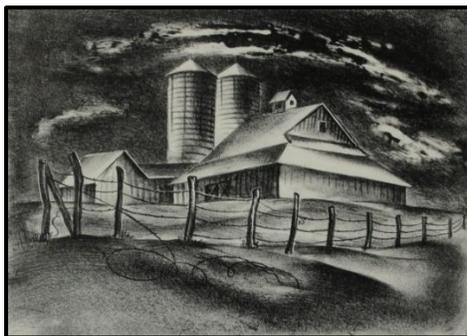
[*Evocative Objects: Still Life Painting in Texas*](#)
August 12 – October 3, 2021

[Online catalog for *Evocative Objects*.](#)

Strokes of Genius: An overview of Texas Impressionism
October 7 – December 18, 2021

Gallery talk with
Michael Grauer,
McCaslin Chair of Cowboy Culture and Curator of Cowboy Collections and Western Art at the National
Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum,
October 7, 2021, 5:30 PM

Tyler, Texas



[*Coreen Mary Spellman: Works on Paper*](#)
September 12 – December 5, 2021
[Tyler Museum of Art](#)

Drawn from the Tyler Museum of Art's Permanent Collection, this exhibition spotlights works on paper by the prolific Texas-based artist from the 1940s and 1950s.

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John Biggers *The Contribution of Negro Women in American Life and Education* 1953
(Blue Triangle Multi-Cultural Association, Houston)

The mission of HETAG is to illuminate Houston's art history by providing viewing opportunities for art, by supporting and doing research on the artists and art communities working in Houston through the years, and by spreading the word.

Back issues of the HETAG Newsletter are available via the
[University of Houston Libraries Digital Library](#)
and
[The Portal to Texas History](#)

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