

HETAG: The Houston Earlier Texas Art Group

HETAG Newsletter No 23, June 2018



Emma Richardson Cherry c1925 (l) and Mildred Sherwood early 1960s (r).

This issue of the HETAG newsletter is dedicated to two great women of Houston art: Emma Richardson Cherry and Mildred Sherwood, perhaps better known to most of us as Mildred Wood Dixon. Both lived to very advanced ages. Cherry died over 60 years ago; Sherwood died earlier this month. Both were dedicated artists who produced remarkable work. As MFAH Director, James Chillman, Jr., famously said back in the 1970s, in Houston art was a woman's affair. That is not so much the case in more recent decades. Chillman was talking about the early 20th Century, and it was not entirely the case even then, but these two great women tower above most of the artists that Houston (or anyplace else) has produced in any era. And so this month we pay homage to them and their art.



**Emma Richardson Cherry *At Seabrook* c1917 (l);
Mildred Wood Dixon *Chichicastenango* 1952 (r).**

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Mildred Sherwood, aka Mildred Wood Dixon



Mildred in 2008

For the second time this year I have the sad task of noting the death of a great Houston artist. Mildred Sherwood – perhaps better known to those in the HETAG community as Mildred Wood Dixon, which is the name she used when she painted and exhibited some of the best and most distinctive paintings from mid-century Houston – has died in Savannah, GA, at a very advanced age. It appears that she did not want that age revealed, so I won't reveal it. But you can get an idea of what it might have been from the fact that she first showed in a Houston Annual Exhibition at MFAH in 1936 – and she wasn't a child.

Through the middle part of the century she made scores of colorful, whimsical, quasi-surreal paintings that are instantly recognizable as hers alone. As she moved into the 1960s and 1970s, her work became less figurative, more abstract, but always exploding with color. In those days she showed widely – in Houston, New York and London – and she is included in a few lucky private collections and the permanent collection of the Museum of Fine Arts Houston.

Those of us who are lucky enough to live with her work every day really know what it is to be art-blessed. Those works are hard to find (make that almost impossible), and they are treasures to guard jealously. Though I only met Mildred a few times over the last years of her life, she and her paintings have made a lasting impression on me. I have hundreds of computer folders with images and info about Houston artists, all of which begin with the artist's last name. Except for one. Mildred's alone is just titled MILDRED.

Note: A full obituary for [Mildred appears in the Houston Chronicle](#) and several of her paintings of Mexico will be included in the exhibition "South and North of the Border: Houston Paints Mexico," opening in the Ideson Gallery at Houston Public Library on August 25, 2018.



Mildred Wood Dixon *Good Friday, Antigua* c.1952, MFAH (l); [jungle animals] c1950s (r).

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Future exhibitions:

SOUTH AND NORTH OF THE BORDER

A pair of exhibitions that will be cornerstones of the Festival of Earlier Houston Art taking place at venues all over Houston during Fall 2018

Sponsored by HETAG: The Houston Earlier Texas Art Group in conjunction with Houston Public Library and The Heritage Society



**Mildred Wood Dixon *Mexican Afternoon* 1955, Collection of Linda and Bill Reaves (l);
Emma Richardson Cherry *Showery Afternoon* c1940s (r).**

SOUTH AND NORTH OF THE BORDER: Houston Paints Mexico

On view at the Julia Ideson Building Exhibition Hall, Houston Public Library
August 25 – November 10, 2018

and

SOUTH AND NORTH OF THE BORDER: Houston Paints Houston

On view at The Heritage Society Museum
August 16 – November 24, 2018

Together the two exhibitions will show more than 120 works created by Houston artists over 130 years, showing the evolving vision of our own city and of our closest neighbor to the south.



Beulah Schiller Ayars *Scene on Buffalo Bayou* c1938 (l); Erik Sprohge *Lime Sellers* c1968 (r).

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Exhibitions around Texas:

Houston:

[40 Years of Discovery: Gifts of Clint Willour](#)

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Until October 14, 2018

Gifts to the museum from a long-time member of the Houston/Galveston arts communities, including work by many Houston artists, among them Richard Stout, Davie Lackey, Penny Cerling, Robin Utterback, Dean Ruck and many others.

Corpus Christi (and Houston):

[Sense of Home: The Art of Richard Stout](#)

Art Museum of South Texas (AMST)

Until September 2, 2018

This exhibition of the art of Houston artist Richard Stout, and curated by HETAGer Sarah Beth Wilson McKeel, Curator of Exhibitions and Collections at the Art Museum of Southeast Texas, opened in Beaumont last year, and will travel to the O’Kane Gallery, University of Houston Downtown, in Fall, 2018.

Galveston:

[Never a Dull Moment: The Art of Grace Spaulding John](#)

Rosenberg Library

Until July 20, 2018

The work of one of the most important Houston artists, drawn from the collection of the Rosenberg Library, and from private collections.

San Antonio:

[The Edgar B. Davis Wildflower Competition Exhibit](#)

San Antonio Art League & Museum

Until July 27, 2018

Showing the works entered in the Davis competitions of the 1920s. Many now iconic paintings originally submitted in the hope of winning what was then the largest art prize offered in America. Curated by HETAGer William Reaves, who literally wrote the book.

[100 Years of Printmaking in San Antonio: Bill Reily](#)

McNay Museum

Until July 1, 2018

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Canyon (and Brussels):

MERRITT MAUZEY'S COTTON-FARMING PRINTS
[Panhandle Plains Historical Museum](#) Graphics Gallery
Through 2018

Michael Grauer, Associate Director for Curatorial Affairs/Curator of Art and Western Heritage at PPHM, also sends word that an exhibition of Texas art, based on his *Texas Impressionism* exhibition from a few years ago, and drawn from Texas collections, including three from PPHM, is now hanging in the official residence of the United States Ambassador to NATO in Brussels, Belgium, at the request of the current Ambassador, Kay Bailey Hutchinson. The show is part of the State Department's Art in Embassies Program. You can read more about it in the [Amarillo newspaper](#). And you can view the [catalog of the exhibition online](#).

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
<https://digital.lib.uh.edu/collection/hetag>**

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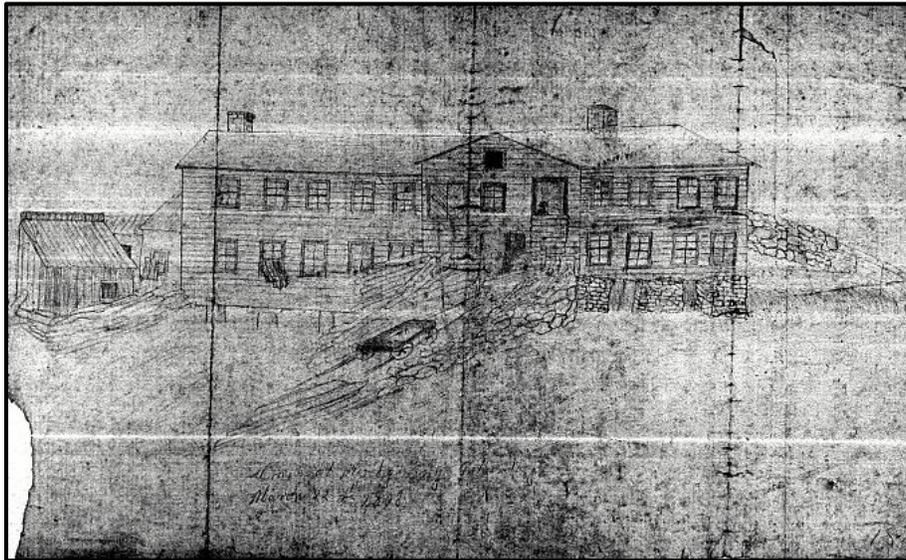
Two more by Mildred Wood Dixon

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HOUSTON ART HISTORY NOTES: Emma Richardson Cherry – Drawings to Paintings

Though today we often think of drawings as finished works of art in their own right, that view is a fairly recent one. Through most of art history the term “working drawing” was unnecessary because all drawings were working drawings – preliminaries to actual works of art, which would mean paintings, sculptures or prints. That was certainly Emma Richardson Cherry’s view of them based on her rigorous 19th Century training at the Art Students League in New York, Académie Julian in Paris and elsewhere. Since they were never intended to be seen by others, only a few of her many hundreds of surviving drawings are signed, and then only to identify her as the student who made them in classes of many students.

But how lucky we are that they have survived. Though they are often foxed, tattered and faded (they have not been stored in anything close to ideal conditions through the 150 years that some of them have lived), they provide a fascinating glimpse of her artistic process. Especially interesting are those drawings from throughout her career that she translated directly into paintings, often with hardly any changes at all to the composition. It is some of those that are included here.



Cherry’s first known work of art is this pencil sketch titled “Sash Factory” with a note in her hand that says “Drawn at Montgomery Factory/March 22nd 1873”. Her father, Perkins Richardson, an architect and builder, was Emma’s first art teacher. The drawing is on the verso of a printed form for her father’s business: Office of P. & R. Richardson/Manufacturers And Dealers In/Sash, Doors, Blinds, Mouldings [sic], & c/Montgomery, Kane Co., Ill.

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On the Gallery, At the Pines 1894, Collection of Juli and Sam Stevens.
(Photo and Drawing, Houston Public Library)

On the Gallery, from 1894, is one of Cherry's early major paintings. At 24 x 36 inches, it is also one of her larger paintings to that date. In constructing it she drew on her academic training and her understanding of Impressionism, recently acquired in Paris. The painting actually came from a photograph which she transformed (with alterations) into a drawing and then directly into the finished work. The figures are Mrs. Cherry's daughter, Dorothy, and her mother. Note that Cherry's father, in the hammock in the photograph, disappears from the drawing and painting, and the basket containing his newspaper moves, presumably for compositional reasons.

Though by the mid-1890s Cherry was already an artist with considerable first-rate training, she decided to return for a refresher to the Art Students League in New York, where she had studied for several years in the early 1880s with William Merritt Chase and others. She recounted that second ASL stint, under the harsh but helpful critical eye of Kenyon Cox, in letters to an unidentified recipient, who was probably her sister, Ruth Richardson in Houston. In the following extracts from those letters Cherry talks specifically about drawing:

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Saturday, March 23

“I worked so hard this week to try and get a decent drawing for [Kenyon] Cox. There is no limit to usefulness. He is so just that he is sarcastic and cruel – and I was bound to do well enough to get a word of encouragement. So yesterday it came. Of course he criticized [sic], but he also told me twice it was a very interesting drawing. That’s about as good as he ever tells one they say – and as myself and one other got such words I felt quite gratified in a large class. Gertrude [Hallack, a fellow student] wanted to know if I did not jump for joy. I told her no. I want it as a constant thing – then I will feel sure about my drawing and that’s what I want.”

Wednesday, March 27(?)

“Cox pulled me all to pieces yesterday. Said I had drawn all the small things and it never would be any better if I worked on it twelve years and I’d better start over! I did not think it was so bad, only I know I do get too much detail and then I suppose he thought I had a good number [in class ranking] and he would give me a strong nudge to do better still. That’s the way they do and it toughens one’s skin. It does not do to be sensitive here. The drawing here is better than it was abroad [in Paris] – and one has to work to keep near the top here now.”

Friday, May 24:

“Mr. Cox has been here and he was interested enough in my work to give me two criticisms and a nice talk. I am painting this week – a good size work and he told me I knew how to paint. That when I could draw as well as I painted I would do very well. The girls think that’s pretty fine from Cox and say I ought to be very much pleased over it. So now I feel better. I hate to be in a class and not do my best. It’s very humiliating. He went all over my work and gave me some fine points. I feel as though he was a great help. In fact by far the best teacher I ever had.

He is a reticent man and you have to question him to draw him out, but when you do he is very interesting. I would like six months more under him in drawing and then I don’t believe I care to work with anyone again – only to go see good things now and then so as to keep pace with the times.”

“I screwed up my courage to ask Mr. Cox for a letter of recommendation yesterday. He gave one to one of the girls that has worked two years with him – it wasn’t very nice, so I dreaded it – but thought if it was good I would use it and if not, I wouldn’t. And I knew one good word from him could be worth more than a half dozen other people. So I braved him and I got it.

It’s very nice indeed, much better than I expected as my concour numbers haven’t been of the best. But I always do better at other times. He said I show more than average ability in drawing and especially in painting – so I am happier than I have been in many many months as that’s the word of one of the best men in this country.

(Extracted from a transcription of letters whose whereabouts is currently not known; the transcription is in the Emma Richard Cherry Papers in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Archive.)

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Venice 1910



Afternoon Clouds, Seabrook c1915

It is possible that Cherry copied her drawings directly onto her canvases – not an uncommon practice for artists. Such a process is not apparent on any of her oils, but the watercolor titled *Afternoon Clouds, Seabrook*, from about 1915 shows traces of pencil sketching on the board. No sketch on paper exists for this piece.

While Kenyon Cox had been quite harsh in his critiques of Cherry's drawing, Marsden Hartley was much more positive twenty years later. In a letter Cherry wrote to her daughter, Dorothy, she recounts Hartley's comments on her work after she had finally worked up the courage to ask him for a critique:

Gloucester, MA, Tuesday, Sept 28, 1920

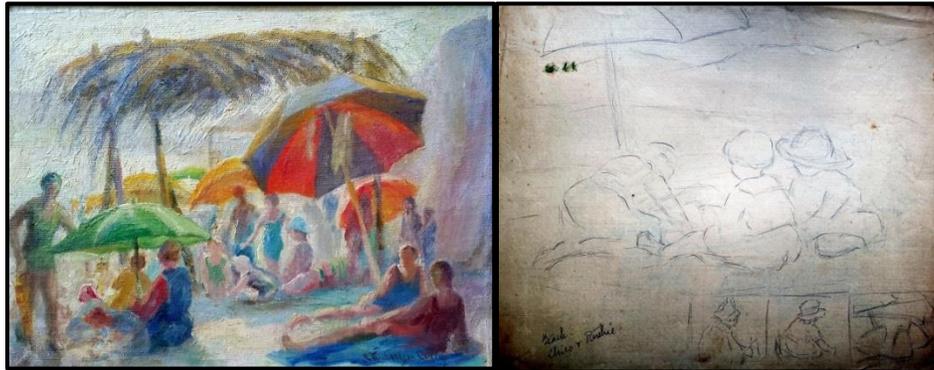
(From the E. Richardson Cherry Papers, [Houston Metropolitan Research Center](#), Houston Public Library, MSS 27, Box 8 Folder 4.)

“Well he came & was quite interested – said I had plenty of things good enough for my Baltimore show* – and to go on with it by all means. Then I showed him my modern flower one & he was very enthusiastic – said ‘well, if you can draw like that you can go any length you wish.’ You can imagine I was pretty happy.”

* This show was presented at the Arundel Club, Baltimore, in October, 1920.

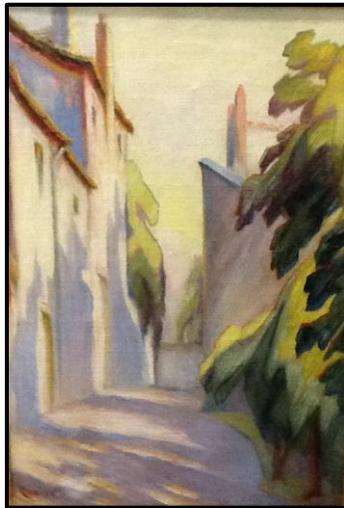
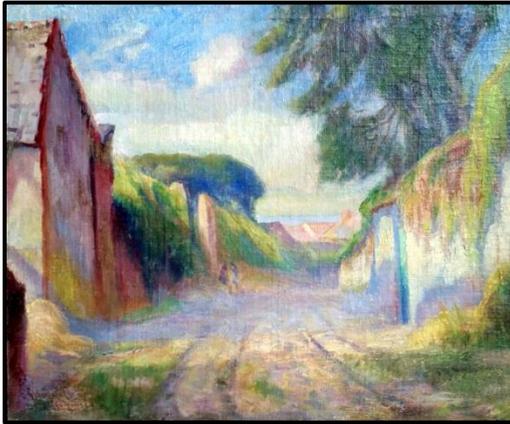
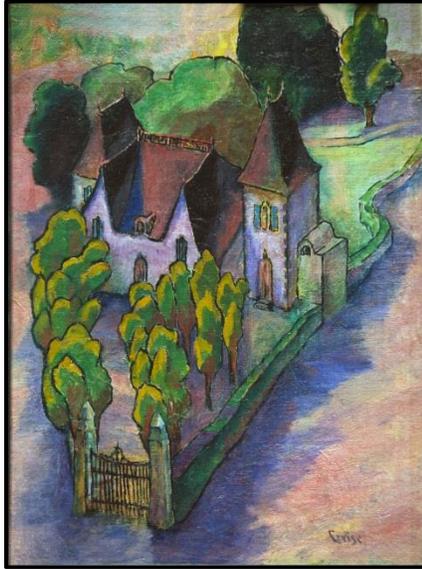
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None of her Gloucester drawings survive, so we can't know which ones Hartley might have been praising, but these drawings, and related paintings, from a few years later show how she continued to rely on drawing, though not always as explicit preliminaries of paintings.



Though often her drawings and the paintings they precede are virtually identical in composition, sometimes the drawings give only hints of what will follow, as with these three: *Long Beach* [Calif], c1923; *Portrait of Dorothy* [her daughter], 1926; [*Gnarled roots*, New York] 1929. The portrait drawing, in fact, seems almost a generic pose that could be used for many portraits.

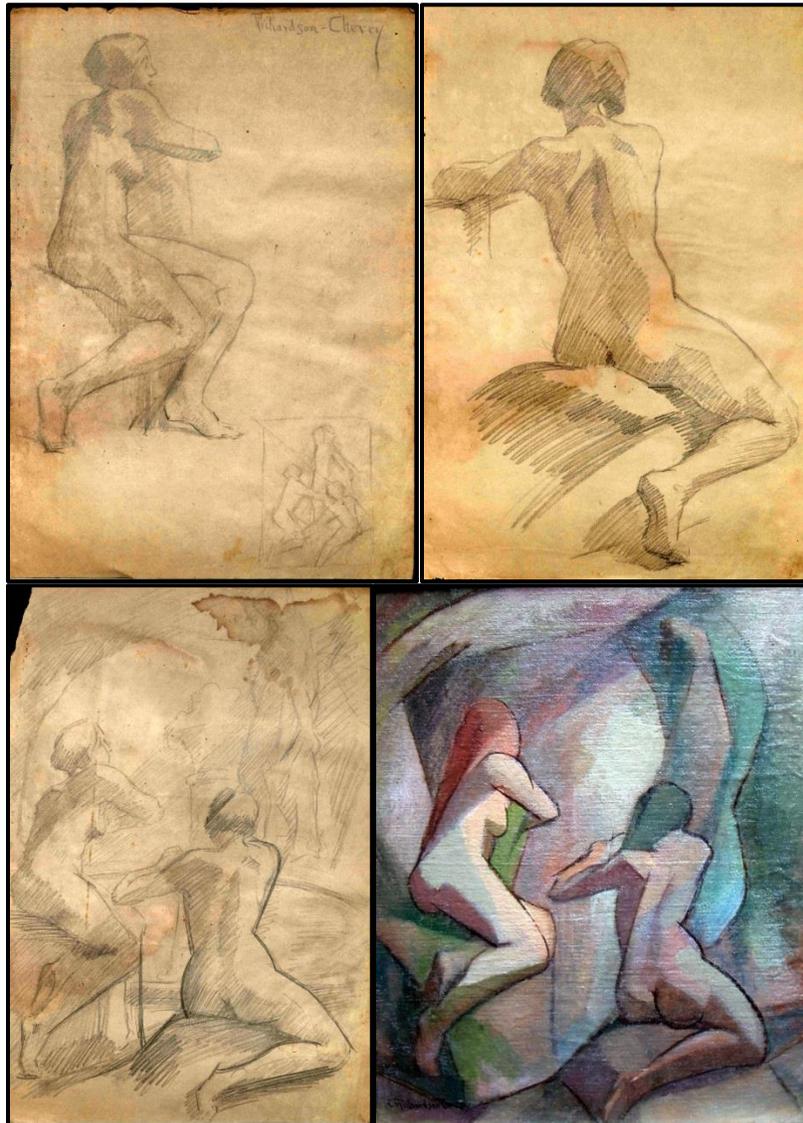
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Three paintings done in Brittany in the summer of 1925, with their preliminary drawings. Note in the top drawing that she specifies the colors of the building, and that she calls for “Fall colors” even though the drawing would have been made in summer.

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In 1925 Cherry went to Paris with the explicit intention of learning more about modernism. While there she studied with a number of teachers, but felt that she benefited most from time spent in the atelier of Cubist painter André Lhote. In undertaking an exploration of Cubism, she was learning a new way of seeing and of constructing her paintings – but still the process began with drawing. Many of her drawings survive, including a large series based on the theory of Dynamic Symmetry. As the drawings here show, she was literally constructing her paintings out of the building blocks of individual drawings done in Lhote's classes.



Arrangement 1925, and preparatory drawings.

Note the small sketch in the corner of the top left drawing indicating how the figures will fit together in the final drawing and the finished painting.

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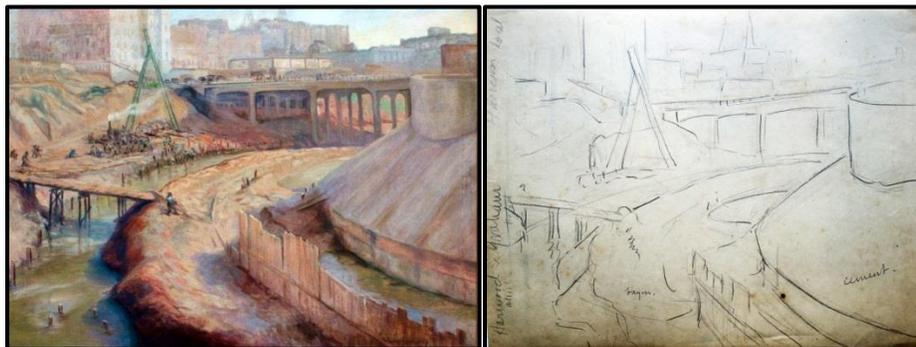
In light of the era in which Cherry worked, it is not surprising that she employed drawing so extensively. But that so many of her drawings survive, and can be linked directly to the paintings they became, gives us a fascinating look at her artistic process, and perhaps that of other artists of her generation as well.



Mount Baldy(?), California, c1923



Views of Mt. Washington, New Hampshire, 1929



Buffalo Bayou – Flood Control, 1937, The Bobbie and John L. Nau Collection.(Drawing, private collection.)