



ETHEL SPEARS  
(1903-1974)

*paintings  
from the  
1920s  
and  
1930s*

THOMAS McCORMICK GALLERY

AN ONLINE  
EXHIBITION

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This brochure is designed to accompany the online exhibition,  
**Ethel Spears** - *paintings from the 1920s and 1930s*.  
The exhibition is posted on the Thomas McCormick Gallery website from  
November 20, 2000 through January 20, 2001. The public is invited to  
download this brochure and print it out on their home or office printer,  
free of charge. All works in this exhibition are for sale. To purchase a  
painting please call the gallery. Other inquiries may be sent by email. The  
provenance of all works illustrated in this brochure is the estate of Ethel  
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I wish to thank the following for their help in making this  
exhibition possible:

First and foremost, Jane Terrell and Larry Boettigheimer for  
their generosity; Andrew Zipkes, our Director of Internet  
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our Gallery Manager and research whiz; and Meta Rose  
Torchia and Justin Schwartz, gallery interns.

Illustrated on the cover:  
**Battery Aquarium (No. 2)** , 1920s  
watercolor on paper, 14<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 10<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>  
signed at lower right  
titled verso, titled lower right on mat

Thomas  
McCormick  
Gallery  
MODERN AND  
CONTEMPORARY  
ART



**O**n first seeing the work of Ethel Spears, I quite frankly did not know what to think. I found myself considering paintings that were compelling and intricate yet rather illustrational and cartoonish—almost child-like. Was I to take this stuff seriously? I suppose what first drew me into her web was that the pictures were funny, and precious few serious artists have the courage to be funny. Spears is certainly a unique artist, rather a scenario of Florine Stettheimer meets Saul Steinberg. The charm of her cartoonish style is deceptive, lulling us into a mood of open vulnerability. Yet her hand is smooth and sure, the drawing complete and her compositions fill the page (that first commandment of drawing) with a masterful ease that guides the viewer through a virtual labyrinth of detail. The result is that we are set up, as it were, to find ourselves accepting these marvelous, mischievous, and charming works as serious painting... which indeed they are.

Beyond her accomplished formal capabilities, Spears captivates us with a direct honesty of subject matter. She simply paints what she knows best—the hustle and bustle of the world around her. Blank sheets of watercolor paper become her diary and she, the chronicler of her own time and place. Seventy years ago, she recorded scenes that are of keen interest to us today—New York and Chicago streets, noted art school studios, and characters of the times—in a manner that comes across strangely free of nostalgia. Spears has always been compelling, direct, and honest as noted in this review of an early exhibition at the Weyhe Gallery:

*Ethel Spears, a bright newcomer from Chicago, approaches the rich lode of Americana with more of a twinkle than Miss [Peggy] Bacon and considerably less hate. For that reason we imagine her stuff will gain a wider currency, most of us being thin-skinned... We think that you will enjoy her, and we are hoping that you do, art suffering as it does from high hat (and a high hat from Paris, at that).*

—*The New Yorker*, Sept. 22, 1928



top:  
Undated photograph of Ethel Spears with students and a model in a class at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

above:  
**Smokers**, 1920s  
watercolor on paper, 12<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 11<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

left:  
**Interior**, 1920s  
watercolor on paper, 13<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 17 inches  
signed at lower right, titled verso  
annotated: 14 S. Lukes Place (Helen Coatsworth, Ethel Spears, Pete Williams dog)



"In her watercolors Spears expressed an affection for the quotidian details of everyday life..."<sup>1</sup>

**E**thel Spears was born in Chicago, Illinois on October 5, 1903. Growing up in that city, she seems not to have had any particular exposure to the arts except through her paternal grandfather, who had run away to sea and painted records of his travels in a diary. Perhaps inspired by him, she set her sights on becoming an artist and, after graduation from high school, enrolled at the School of the Art Institute. She chose to study in the textile design department, earning a certificate after three years. Spears recorded that she had her first solo exhibition at the school in 1923, when she was twenty years old. This date most likely coincides with her graduation from the textile program.

Deciding that textile design was not her true calling, Spears immediately re-enrolled at the school, this time in the fine arts department, beginning her career over again. At that time, the faculty at the School of the Art Institute (as well as the administration at the museum) was overwhelmingly conservative, turning a discouraging eye towards anything modern or avant-garde. "Reverence for the antique and the idealized depiction of the human figure, for the technical expertise of past masters, for the image of the Renaissance artist as a worldly *homme d'affaires* had permeated School curriculum since its founding in 1866 as the Chicago Academy of Design."<sup>2</sup> When the Armory Show came to Chicago in 1913 it was received with scorn by both students and faculty. Walt Kuhn, one of the show's New York organizers, wrote that "the instructors at the Institute are mad through."<sup>3</sup> It was into this atmosphere that Spears now became a student of painting and she chose to study with the most progressive member of the faculty—John Norton.

Norton (1876-1934) was a respected painter and muralist who espoused the modernist doctrine, against the grain of most of his colleagues at the Institute. He had worked with Frank Lloyd Wright on the Midway Gardens murals and began teaching decorative design and mural painting in 1912. Under his guidance, Spears was awarded the honor of a commission to paint two murals in the tearoom of the Art Institute. "Those murals established her as both skilled painter and humorist. Even the heavy *depression* frowns on faces of visitors to the tearoom have been smoothed out all these years in presence of *Life Class* and *Dudley Crafts Watson Telling the Ladies' Clubs About Art*."<sup>4</sup>

In about 1925, Spears graduated and decided to move to Woodstock, New York, in order to study drawing with the renowned modernist sculptor Alexander Archipenko. She states that Norton's class had "tightened her technique"<sup>5</sup> and she felt the need for a change of scenery. After nine months in



top:  
**School of the Art Institute (Signing in for courses)** , 1920s  
watercolor on paper, 17 x 11<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches  
signed at lower right, titled verso



above:  
**Still Life Painting** , c.1930  
watercolor on paper, 13 x 18<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches  
signed at lower right, titled verso and annotated: Laura Van Pappelendam's  
Art Institute painting class





**Columbia University**, 1920s, watercolor on paper, 13 1/4 x 19 5/8 inches  
signed at lower right, titled verso



**Lauretta Sondag, Woodstock, NY**, 1920s, watercolor on paper,  
11 1/2 x 11 inches, signed at lower right, titled verso



**Andrene Kauffman (at her studio)**, 1920s, watercolor on paper  
9 1/2 x 12 1/2 inches, signed at lower right, titled verso

Woodstock she moved to New York City where she continued working with Archipenko. In all, Spears lived in New York for about five years (on West 12th Street) and attended classes at the Art Students League and New York University. Like hungry artists today, she supported herself with odd jobs including telephone switchboard operator, elevator operator, and textile studio worker. She spoke of the challenges of being a young artist adrift in New York and there are several wonderful watercolors of her friends and their apartments showing the young bohemians at work and play.

Sometime around 1929, Spears moved to Paris. Almost nothing is known about her stay in Europe although she may have taken some classes and no doubt she visited many museums and studied the great painters. The length of her stay is also unknown but she was resident long enough to get a job with a book publisher. Whatever the timetable, she was back in New York, briefly, and relocated to Chicago by 1930.

Resettled back in her hometown, she enrolled once again at the School of the Art Institute as a post-graduate painting student, eventually receiving her MFA in Fine Arts. Though the scholastic atmosphere at the school was much the same as before, there had been hints of change. In the early twenties, George Bellows, Leon Kroll, and Randall Davey had all been invited as visiting artists and their work and influence, while seemingly conservative today, was at the time a radical shift towards the progressive camp and affected a growing number of students. Helen Gardner had introduced the comprehensive study of art history (it is hard to believe that this was ever not a part of the curriculum). There had also been a concerted effort to establish a serious industrial arts program and though failed, it too left a progressive scar on both the faculty and students. The Art Institute had likewise been slowly exhibiting more modern work, initially through an alliance with the Arts Club. Between 1920 and 1927 the Arts Club was afforded gallery space within the museum for its regular avant-garde exhibitions. As for the permanent collection, major examples of impressionism and post-impressionism were accessioned during the twenties.

In the thirties, things began to gradually change at both the school and the museum. A few more progressively trained artists joined the faculty, notably Laura Van Pappelendam, Francis Chapin, Boris Anisfeld, Kathleen Blackshear, and Ivan Albright. Students were encouraged to explore their personal intuitions through expressive techniques. The regionalist school of narrative painting, which portrayed everyday life, was gaining acceptance. Certainly Spears' focus on painting people and places was itself a style that was gaining currency. In 1936, Doris Lee, whose work was not unlike Spears', won the Logan Prize in the museum's annual exhibition.

In 1937, Ethel Spears was hired by the School of the Art Institute as an instructor, beginning a 24 year career with that institution. During her tenure she taught design, painting, ceramics, enameling, and silkscreen printing (establishing departments in the latter two disciplines). Like her mentor, John Norton, Spears rejected traditional academic conventions and is remembered fondly by many of her students as a favorite and influential teacher. One of the traditions that Spears started, along with Helen Gardner and Kathleen Blackshear, was taking students to study the collections of the Field Museum and the Oriental Institute. This exposure to primitive and non-Western art changed the way a generation of students thought about the world and helped to shape the development of art in Chicago in the 1950s and 60s. Certainly the foundation of movements associated with Chicago—Monster Roster, Hairy Who, and the Chicago Imagists—can be linked to an awareness of non-traditional and non-western art as championed by Spears and her colleagues.

By the late 1950s, the Spears began to suffer from an illness that might have been related to lead poisoning from her work with enamels. In 1961, she decided to retire from teaching and moved, along with her companion Kathleen Blackshear, to Navasota, Texas, a small town in southeast Texas cotton country. Navasota was Blackshear's hometown and the couple settled into the slow pace of rural Texas life. Spears continued to exhibit and work, painting both Texas scenes in her familiar style and bold abstractions. In 1973 the Chicago Society of Artists elected her to an honorary membership in recognition of her many years of devoted service to that organization. Ethel Spears died on August 2, 1974 in Navasota where she is buried in the family plot.

Tom McCormick, Chicago  
November, 2000

#### Notes

1. Susan Landauer and Becky Duval Reese, Woman Painters of the American West, 1890–1945 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 195.
2. Sue Ann Prince, ed., The Old Guard and the Avant-Garde, Modernism in Chicago, 1910–1940 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990) 193.
3. Prince 198–199.
4. C.J. Bulliet, "Artists of Chicago Past and Present, No. 82: Ethel Spears," The Chicago Daily News 1 May 1937: 4 R
5. Bulliet 4 R.



**Arrival of Mr. Borge** , 1920s, watercolor on paper  
16<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 10<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches, signed at lower right, titled verso



**Weehawkin Street (NYC)** , 1920s, oil on canvas  
22 x 24 inches, signed verso  
a titled watercolor also exists of this image





**Winter Street Scene**, early 1920s, oil on canvas  
18 1/2 x 24 inches, signed at lower right and verso



**Abingdon Square**, also **New York 12th Street**, 1920s, watercolor on paper  
13 3/4 x 19 7/8 inches, signed at lower right, titled verso



**Ryerson Library**, 1920s, watercolor on paper  
8 1/8 x 8 7/8 inches, signed at lower right, titled verso

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**S**pears was exhibiting professionally in Chicago as early as 1926. During her years in New York she also had exhibition success, including a 1928 showing at Weyhe Gallery, while continuing to have her work seen regularly back in Chicago. Over the years, she compiled a considerable exhibition record which includes: *Art Institute of Chicago Annual Exhibition* - 22 times between 1926 and 1951; Chicago Society of Artists - first juried exhibit in 1928 and regularly thereafter; *International Watercolor Exhibition*, the Art Institute of Chicago - 1934 & 1935; Delphic Studios Exhibition, New York - 1935; New Jersey State Museum, Trenton - 1936; Riverside Museum Exhibition, New York - 1939; *American Art Today*, New York World's Fair - 1939; Brooklyn Museum - 1933; Whitney Museum of American Art; Houston Museum of Fine Arts; Corcoran Gallery; Laguna Gloria Museum and others. Most recently, she is included the current exhibition, *Illusions of Eden, Visions of the American Heartland* at the Columbus Museum of Art. This show will travel to Madison, Wisconsin, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, Vienna, Austria, and Budapest, Hungary.

A major part of Ethel Spears' career was her mural work, including more than twenty-three murals in the Chicago area. She was a member of the National Society of Mural Painters. Beyond her early murals at the Art Institute of Chicago she was active in the thirties under the WPA in the mural and easel division of the IAP, creating murals for the University of Illinois, the Treasury Department, and various hospitals, playgrounds, and community houses around the greater Chicago area.



**Jefferson Court (NYC)** , 1920s, watercolor on paper  
14 1/2 x 18 1/2 inches, signed at lower right, titled verso  
exhibited: Brooklyn Museum, 1933



**Hester Street (NYC)** , 1920s, watercolor on paper  
11 1/8 x 16 5/8 inches, signed at lower right

When Spears was profiled by C.J. Bulliet in his ongoing series called *Artists of Chicago—Past and Present* (*Chicago Daily News*, 1 May, 1937), he wrote of her approach to making a picture:

“Indeed, Miss Spears is free to acknowledge a ‘literary’ method in her art, once severely tabooed by the ‘moderns.’

When she starts a picture she doesn’t know how it will finish.

She keeps building it up, character by character, incident after incident—and that’s the way you have to look at her pictures if you want to get the full force.

Generally, a glance tells you the main ‘story.’ But, as you examine the details, your grin grows broader and broader.

Often more than not her canvases are alive with tiny figures, and each of these figures is doing his or her significant ‘bit’ to contribute to the whole design.”

Family lore holds that the Spears also liked to include herself, and sometimes a friend, in the crowd of humanity. True or not, it is fun to search the crowd for the artist.

below:

**State Street**

1920s, watercolor on paper  
10 1/2 x 17 inches  
signed at lower right, titled verso







**Riverside Drive, NYC** , 1920s, watercolor on paper  
13<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 18 inches, signed at lower right, titled verso



**Ship's Deck Scene** , 1920s, watercolor on paper  
10<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 16<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches, signed at lower center



**Engelwood, Chicago** , c.1930, watercolor on paper  
11<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 17 inches, signed at lower right, titled verso



**Raccoons, Bronx Park** , 1920s, watercolor on paper  
11<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 17 inches, signed at lower left, titled at lower center



**Bridge Game** , 1920s, watercolor on paper  
11<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 14<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches, signed at lower right, titled verso  
annotated: Laurretta Sondag, Janet Chryst, 2 girls from the commercial art office where Laurretta got her freelance art work for furniture illustration, E. Spears sketching this picture, 12th St. Place, New York City (304 West 12th)



**Riverside Drive** , 1920s, watercolor on paper  
14<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 19<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches, signed at lower right, titled verso





**Gas Tank, Chicago** , c.1930, watercolor on paper  
11 x 14<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches, signed at lower center, titled verso



**At the Park Square** e, 1920s, watercolor on paper  
10<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 16 inches, titled at lower left



**Maxwell Street** , c.1930, watercolor on paper  
11 x 17 inches, signed at lower right, titled verso



**Southside Beach Scene, Chicago** , 1930s, gouache on paper  
22<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 31<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches



**New York City** , 1920s, watercolor on paper  
13<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 19<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches, signed at lower right, titled verso

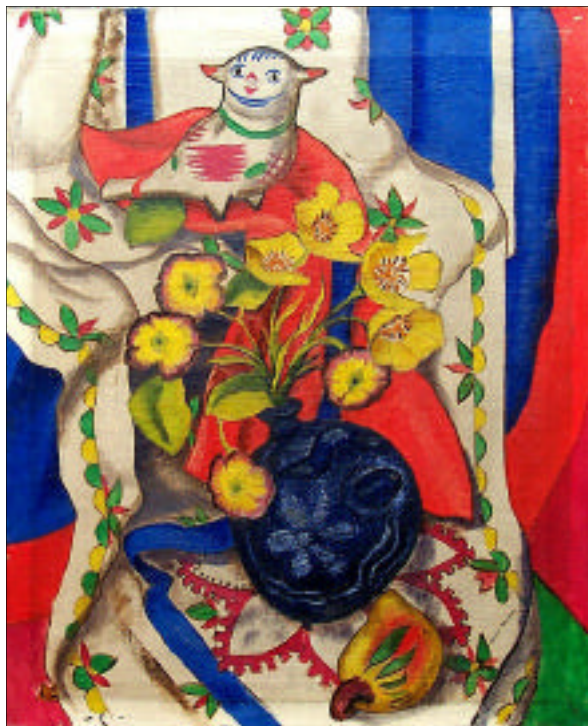


**Atlantic City** , 1920s, watercolor on paper  
13<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 18<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches, signed at lower right, titled verso  
exhibited: Art Institute of Chicago, International Exhibition of watercolors, 1935





**Battery Aquarium** , 1920s, watercolor and gouache on paper  
22 1/2 x 30 7/8 inches, signed at lower right, titled verso



**Still Life with Mexican Vase** , early 1920s, oil on canvas  
24 1/2 x 20 inches, signed at lower right



**Lady's Club Pool** , 1920s, watercolor on thin board  
12 x 9 3/4 inches, signed at lower right