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Sarah Spurgeon

Artist and Educator

by Karen Blair

We are well aware that artists have enriched the history of the Northwest region, but art educators have also made valuable contributions to cultural life. One such contributor was Sarah Spurgeon, who not only painted and exhibited in Washington State, but also instructed college students, mentored them throughout their careers, published in education and art periodicals, and shaped organizations devoted to learning and the arts.

Edna May Sarah Spurgeon (1903-1985) was born in Harlan, Iowa and raised with her brother George in Galva, Iowa. She was the daughter of George Rolla Spurgeon, a grain-buyer and later grain elevator owner for Trans-Mississippi Elevators, and Emily Wyland, an active volunteer in community organizations. While little is known about her early life, from her actions one assumes that Spurgeon was a devoted daughter. In the 1950s, in honor of her mother's public service, Spurgeon presented the new Galva Public Library with a painting of the original over-the-firehouse library room her mother helped to found in the 1920s. When

her mother died, she commuted home on weekends from her teaching job in a nearby town to cook and clean for her widowed father.

Spurgeon grew up in Galva, where she graduated from the local high school in 1922. After attending the University of Iowa, she earned both her Bachelor's (1927) and Master's (1930) degrees in art. She taught briefly and then returned to the university, offering instruction there for four years. In 1929, with a scholarship from the Carnegie Institute, she did graduate work with art historian Paul Sachs at Harvard University. She briefly studied at the Grand Central Art School in New York City. Later in life, even after summers of study in Mexico and Italy, she reflected that her teachers in Manhattan, George Oberteuffer and George Bridgeman, were her best instructors.

The Great Depression made employment hard to come by and like many artists Spurgeon turned for work to the federally-funded WPA Art Project. The government relief work built her self-esteem; "It was my own, and I did a full day's work

painting, and it was a fascinating, interesting kind of thing to do, interesting people to work with." She painted scenes of Iowa and also assisted Grant Wood in painting a mural displayed originally in the experimental school at the University of Iowa and later moved to Iowa State University's library. She also modeled for one of the figures in the mural. Her thoughts about the renowned regional painter, Grant Wood, famed for *American Gothic* (1930), are preserved in an interview she did in 1964 for the Archives of American Art. She observed, "My experience there at Iowa City under Grant Wood was that it was a growth kind of thing, and very permissive, really, considering that it was all governmental." She credited Wood with teaching her "the mechanics of preparing a canvas," which she later passed on to her own students.

Spurgeon left the WPA as soon as she found permanent employment as an English teacher at Buena Vista College in Storm Lake, Iowa. She also founded the school's art department.

In 1939, Spurgeon began a 33 year career as a professor of art,

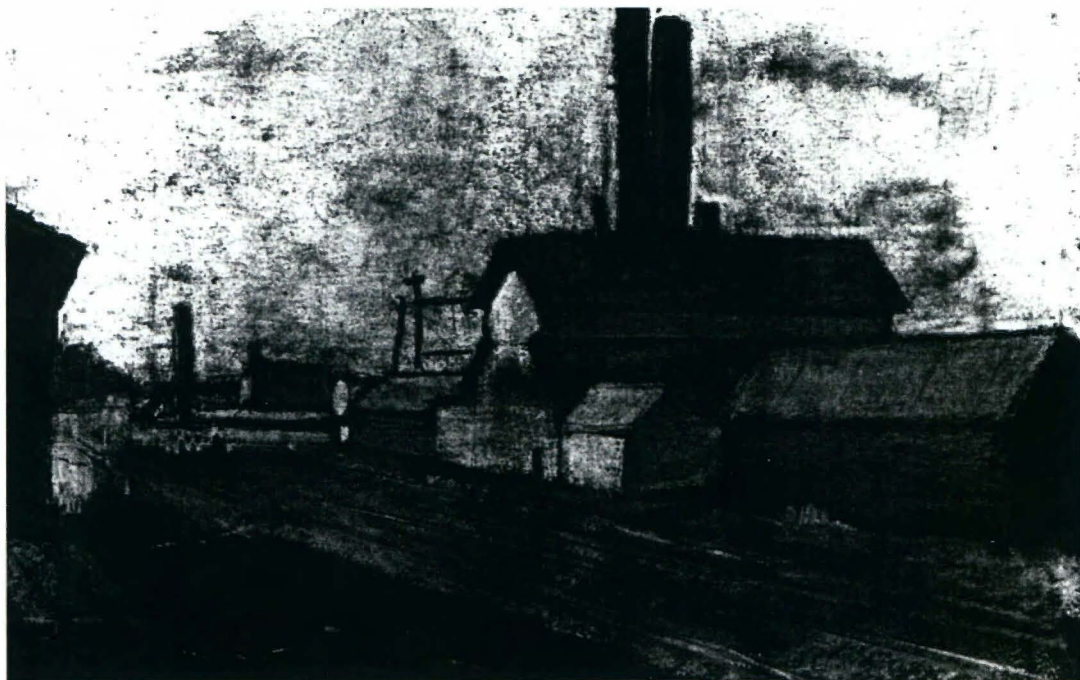


Figure 1: Sarah Spurgeon, Milwaukee Tracks, Storm Lake, Iowa, c. 1935, pastel on colored paper, 7 1/4" x 11 1/2". Collection of Jane Orleman, Ellensburg, Washington.

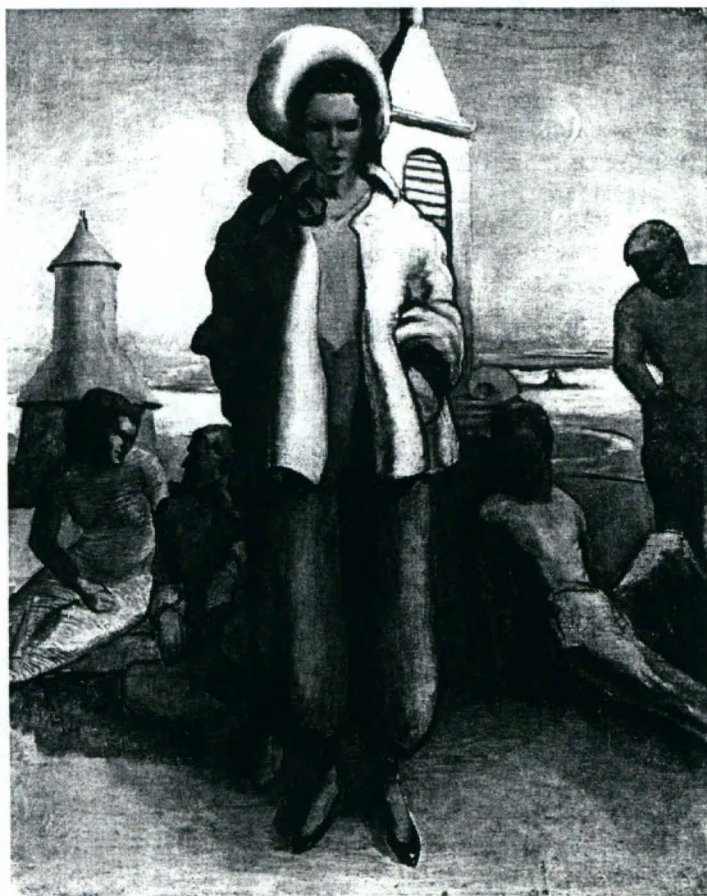


Figure 2: Sarah Spurgeon, Untitled, inscribed verso on stretcher bar "prelim for larger oil S. Spurgeon", c. 1935, 25" x 20", oil on canvas. Collection of Jane Orleman, Ellensburg, Washington.

specializing in figure drawing, at Central Washington State College — now University — in Ellensburg, Washington. Her long career was interrupted only by a two-year stint, during World War II, for the design unit at Boeing Aircraft Company near Seattle. She was a production illustrator for the B-17 and B-29 aircraft, making three-dimensional drawings from blueprints.

Central's then president, Robert McConnell, urged Spurgeon to return to Ellensburg, where she won high praise as a teacher of painting. She coaxed her students to show their work and sell it. She became known for her annual outdoor art show, a special event she sponsored in the backyard of her home. The show featured work by her students and the high school pupils of her own graduates from Central. She frequently collected the work of her current and former students.

Spurgeon also contributed to the beauty of Central's campus, creating

works that are still on display. Her painted tiles, cataloguing the history of printing techniques, are installed around the library fireplace of Hebel Hall. Her portraits of Corrine Farrell and Geography Professor George Beck decorate the lobbies of Farrell and Beck Halls.

Spurgeon's own work was recognized throughout the region, where she won prizes, commissions and opportunities to exhibit her paintings. During her most productive years, her paintings were sold through a Seattle gallery. Most notably, she painted a giant mural, seven feet by twenty feet in size, still on view at the Ginkgo Museum in Vantage, Washington; she exhibited at the Henry Gallery in Seattle in the *Music and Art Foundation's Invitational Exhibit of Artists of Washington* in 1954; her work appeared in the *Northwest Annual* at the Seattle Art Museum, the Puyallup State Fair and Bellevue Arts and Crafts Fair; and she contributed to *Design* and *Childhood*

Education Magazine.

Like her mother, Spurgeon was active in clubs, serving her community as president of the Ellensburg Study Club and honorary member of the Ellensburg Chamber of Commerce. Professionally, she retained memberships in several teaching and art organizations, including the National Education Association, American Association of University Professors, Washington Education Association and Women Painters of Washington.

In 1958, she developed a severe debility from rheumatoid arthritis that hampered her painting career. In spite of her limitations, she taught for another 13 years. Spurgeon retired as an educator in 1971 and was honored as professor emeritus. Even after retirement, she continued producing landscapes that are valued still by her colleagues and friends. In 1977, Central Washington University further honored her contributions by dedicating the Sarah Spurgeon Art Gallery in the university's new art building, Randall Hall. Spurgeon attended the opening, at which 44 of her former students exhibited watercolors, oils, drawings, wood sculpture and ceramic pieces. Many of the artists attended the reception to honor their mentor, who had continued to offer friendship and advice long after their college graduation.

Spurgeon died on October 28, 1985 at the age of eighty-two. Her ashes were buried in the family plot in Iowa. Although the written record of her accomplishments is small and her work is dispersed throughout many collections, the Ellensburg arts community continues to remember Spurgeon's steady devotion to her students and commitment to their work and careers in art.

Karen J. Blair is a professor of American history at Central Washington University in Ellensburg, Washington. She is the author of The Torchbearers: Women and their Amateur Arts Associations in America, 1890-1930 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) and editor of Women in Pacific Northwest History: An Anthology (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989). The Sarah Spurgeon Art Gallery at Central Washington University is open Monday through Friday from September through June.