

Exhibit to reveal Eudora Welty as a Passionate Observer



Portrait of Eudora Welty, 1930s, from the exhibit *Passionate Observer: Eudora Welty among Artists of the Thirties*.

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■ Other artists from 1930s featured in April museum showing

By Sherry Lucas
Clarion-Ledger Staff Writer

An upcoming major exhibition at the Mississippi Museum of Art puts Jackson literary icon Eudora Welty in colorful new company.

Passionate Observer: Eudora Welty Among Artists of the Thirties, April 6-June 30, places the skilled photographer among her peers in the art world for a fresh look at 1930s America, and first-time look at Welty as a visual artist. Welty died in Jackson July 23, 2001, at age 92.

The show is the sixth in the museum's Annie Laurie Swaim Hearin Memorial Exhibition Series.

Passionate Observer is one of several events focusing on Welty the year following her death: the March 23 Mississippi Boychoir's performance of Sam Jones' musical adaptation of her story, *The Shoebird*; the recent Natchez Literary and Film Celebration's tribute; Canton artist Mary Jane Dow's prints of Mississippi writers and their homes, at Brown's Fine Art and other outlets in the state; an Old Capitol Museum exhibit, *Remembering Welty*, on the heels of the art museum's show.

Welty's successful writing career spanned six decades. The personal photographs she took of rural Mississippi in the 1930s, while working as a publicist for the Works Progress Administration, show an eye as keen as her ear for the rhythms, character and characters of her home state.

"Mississippians have been very familiar with her photographs for a long time and we wanted to put them in a context of the nation's art of the period," said Patti Carr

Black, guest curator and author of *Art in Mississippi: 1720-1980*.

The dominant theme in the country of that time was the American Scene movement, with Regionalism (rural) and social realism (urban) as its major components. "The whole nation was looking at the nation for its inspiration, as opposed to Europe, where it had been looking. And Eudora was part of that great tapestry across the nation of people looking at their own back yards, so to speak."

American Scene movement painters included Thomas Hart Benton, Reginald Marsh and Grant Wood. Because Welty's interest was in photography, works by three major women photographers of the era (Margaret Bourke-White, Doris Ulmann and Berenice Abbott) are included for comparison.

The exhibit focuses, too, on Welty's art contemporaries in Jackson and in Mississippi who were also depicting the American scene — Helen J. Lotterhos, Karl Wolfe, William Hollingsworth,

Marie Hull, Walter Anderson, John McCrady, Dusti Bongé, Caroline Compton and Richmond Barthé (who painted in Europe).

"It really does examine her, not as a writer who also takes photographs, but as a visual artist working within an important movement for visual arts in this country,"

museum director Betsy Bradley said.

For instance, a pairing of photographs of houses of the rural poor, in Walker Evans' image, reveals the poverty. "In Welty's, the camera and the eye shifted to a bottle tree. She saw the poetry, beauty and hope in a situation like that," Bradley said.

Placing Welty's photographs in the much broader context of the period will heighten awareness of her art beyond her home state and region, said René Paul Barilleaux,



Eudora Welty: *Tomato packers' recess*, Crystal Springs, 1935-1936.

museum chief curator and co-curator of the show. "She'll be appreciated as a visual artist at a more national level, internationally even."

A \$25 hardcover book by the same title will be published by the museum in tandem with the exhibit; \$2 from the sale of each will go to the Welty Foundation, which is restoring Welty's Belhaven home and gardens. Welty scholar Suzanne Marrs, Black and Francis V. O'Connor, a specialist in 1930s art, contributed essays for the book.

The museum will capitalize on the show's '30s theme with special events and educational programs. An economist will talk at a business lunch about economic lessons of the Great Depression. The museum's annual winetasting takes on a "Bootlegging and Bluegrass" flavor this year. An evening co-sponsored by the Crossroads Film Society will show films from the era, and a weekly evening series will feature Southern writers reading Welty's works.

Thursday, O'Connor, an expert on art of the 1930s and the Works

Progress Administration, will give a lecture to the museum's Gallery Guild at 10:30 a.m. at the museum; it's open to nonguild members for \$5 each. Additional symposia will be offered during the exhibit's run.

Bradley said the show will be as dramatic and powerful as previous exhibits in the Hearin series. "Focusing on a Mississippi artist says we actually produce art worthy of this kind of show."

"It's not only about bringing in big shows from the outside. It's also about holding up our own."



Eudora Welty Collection — Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson

Eudora Welty: *Preacher and leaders of the Holiness Church*, Jackson, 1935-1936.