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Eudora Welty Among Artists of the Thirties

by Patti Carr Black

When Eudora Welty came back to Jackson, Mississippi, in 1931 because of her father's illness, she did not intend to stay the rest of her life. Cities in general, with their cultural offerings, attracted her. At the University of Wisconsin, from which she graduated in 1929, she was known for going to Chicago as many weekends as she could manage. Her years at Columbia University in New York, 1930-1931, were filled with theater, art, music, and the excitement of being in a vibrant city. Welty kept up with what was happening in the art world of New York, and she began to pursue seriously both photography and writing.

She returned to the familiarity of Jack-

son's small community of artists. Bessie Cary Lemly, then in her sixties, taught in the Belhaven College Art Department. Dozens of others in town were occasional artists. Marie Atkinson Hull was the acknowledged star of the local art scene. Just before the economic crash of 1929, she had won a prestigious prize that allowed her to paint in Europe for two months.

Soon Jackson would have a trio of younger artists with equally serious intentions. All three were graduates of The Art Institute of Chicago, and all were in their home state of Mississippi to ride out the Great Depression. Karl Wolfe, Helen Jay Lotterhos, and William Hollingsworth arrived back in Jackson shortly after Eudora's return and they all became friends and mutual admirers.

These young artists were living in a nation, a state, and a city characterized by nationalism, both artistic and political. World War I had produced a great need for a national sense of identity. The Depression, with the collapse of industry and business, deepened America's need to look at and define the national character. American artists nationwide focused on the activities and patterns of everyday life in America, some

BELOW LEFT: Eudora Welty, *Child on the Porch*, 1935-36, Eudora Welty Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson.

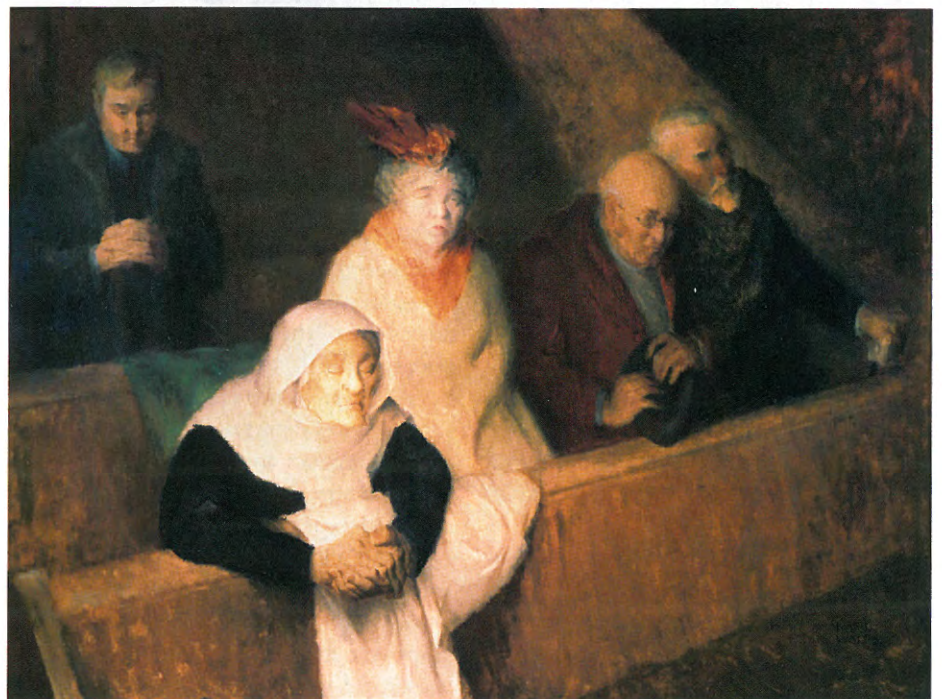
BELOW: Eudora Welty, *Preacher and Leaders of the Holiness Church*, Jackson, 1935-36, Eudora Welty Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson.





Passionate Observer: Eudora Welty Among Artists of the Thirties is on view through June 30, 2002, at the Mississippi Museum of Art, 201 E. Pascagoula St., Jackson, Mississippi, 39201, 601-960-1515, www.ms.museumart.org. Organized by the Mississippi Museum of Art, the exhibition is accompanied by an 84-page hardcover book. ABOVE: Dusti Bongé, *Where the Shrimp Pickers Live*, 1940, o/c, Mississippi Museum of Art, gift of Dusti Bongé Foundation, Inc. RIGHT: Karl Wolfe, *People in Church*, c. 1936, o/board, Mississippi Museum of Art, gift of Mildred Nungester Wolfe.

to critique it, some to glorify it, and others simply to show it. This focus, collectively called the American scene movement, virtually produced an American self-portrait. Some of the artists were social realists whose works illuminated urban societal problems. Others were Regionalists, the





LEFT: John McCrady, *The Shooting of Huey Long*, 1939, Mr. and Mrs. Keith C. Marshall.

RIGHT: William Hollingsworth, *High Farish*, 1941, o/c, Bancorp South.

BELOW RIGHT: Walter Anderson, *Black Skimmer*, c. 1930, o/board, collection of Family of Walter Anderson.

son Municipal Art Gallery. Their lives were entwined with each other and with Welty as she embraced their talents and efforts.

Helen Jay Lotterhos (1905-1981) returned home to Jackson the same year that Eudora returned from her year at Columbia University. They became good friends, sharing a lively interest in art and writing. As her friendship with Welty developed, they often went on sketching trips around Jackson. Lotterhos continued to be an active artist and teacher in Jackson throughout her lifetime. She had shows at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, the Delgado Museum of Art in New Orleans, Belhaven College in Jackson, and Rockefeller Center in New York City.

William Hollingsworth (1910-1944) was a native Jacksonian. He and Welty knew each other as children. While enrolled at The Art Institute of Chicago from 1930 to 1934, he married a fashion artist and had a son. They intended to stay in Chicago, but the Depression forced Hollingsworth to bring his family to Jackson in 1934, where the couple lived with his father. Hollingsworth found employment at the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). With a wife and baby to support, and an ailing father to care for, his government job had to take precedence over his art. When the FERA office closed down in 1938, Hollingsworth set up a studio in his father's house and devoted himself full time to painting. In 1941 he established the art department at Millsaps College and taught there until 1943.

Hollingsworth found immediate success with his art. In his first year back, he won the gold medal from the Mississippi Art Association was accepted in exhibitions at the Cincinnati Art Museum and The Art Institute of Chicago. At the beginning of World War II he enlisted in the U.S. Navy, but was discharged within two weeks because of bad eyesight. Despondent over the war and his father's bad health, he nevertheless remained passionate about his work and continued to record scenes in and around Jackson. In the summer of 1944

dominant group, intent on creating an authentic American art through the experiences of rural America. Welty and her artist friends focused on the American scene, but none of them were on the hyperpatriotic bandwagon that the American scene movement evoked in many of the nationally known artists. Nor was Welty aligned with the artists concerned with social reform or the Farm Security Administration photographers assigned to document poverty in the South.

By 1933 President Roosevelt had included in his economic recovery program called the New Deal, several programs for artists. Almost all of Mississippi's leading artists were employed at some time by the

Federal Art Project. Welty herself worked for the Works Progress Administration as a junior publicist, writing feature stories and conducting interviews. Her job required her to travel around the state, and she took advantage of these travels to take her own photographs.

All three of the young Jackson artists struggled to be professional artists, honing their techniques and practicing their craft. All three were interested in figurative work and landscapes. The tradition of realism, with only slight echoes of their training in European modernism, dominated their works. They were all active in the Mississippi Art Association, presenting their shows and the work of others at the Jack-



Hollingsworth took his own life.

Only Karl Wolfe (1904-1985) was new to Eudora. Wolfe had studied at The Art Institute of Chicago from 1924 to 1928, traveled in Europe on an art scholarship, and returned home to ride out the Great Depression. After the surprise of good sales at an exhibition sponsored by the Mississippi Art Association in 1931, he moved from Columbia to Jackson to pursue his career. Wolfe became friends with William Hollingsworth. They often talked together about art and its relationship to their lives and they both worked long hours at the Municipal Art Gallery, making it a viable venue for professional artists. After the war ended in 1945, he brought his new wife to Jackson and they both had a full lifetime of making art, working in oils, watercolors, ceramics, and stained glass. The Wolfe Studio is an important art landmark in Jack-





hos, and was an art colleague of Wolfe and Hollingsworth. Hull was, for over a half century, the dynamo that turned the wheels of art in Mississippi. She studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts from 1911 to 1912 and the Art Students League of New York in 1922. Hull won many medals and first-prize ribbons during her painting career of almost seventy years, and she was a friend and mentor to artists all over the state.

Other important artists were at work in Mississippi, recording the varied landscapes and town scenes from the Gulf Coast to the hills of Oxford. John McCrady (1911-1968) was considered early in his career to be one of the leading southern painters of the American scene movement. The powerful components of his work—history, religion, and black culture—were all part of his background. It is not known whether Welty and McCrady knew each other, but certainly they knew of each other's work.

Walter Anderson (1903-1965), who is now known as one of the South's greatest artists, spent most of his artistic energies during the Depression designing and painting ceramic pieces to support himself and his wife. Welty never met Anderson, but

son, still providing work and exhibition space for his wife and daughter.

Marie Atkinson Hull (1890-1980) had an influence on the lives of all four of the

young artists in Jackson during the Depression years. She was charismatic, passionate, informed, energetic, and peripatetic. She taught painting to both Welty and Lotter-

FAR LEFT: Eudora Welty, *Delegate, Jackson*, post 1936, Eudora Welty Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson.

LEFT: Eudora Welty, *Tomato Packers' Recess*, Crystal Springs, 1935-36, Eudora Welty Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson.

BELOW LEFT: John McCrady, *Oxford on the Hill*, 1939, o/c, City of Oxford, Mississippi.

RIGHT: Marie Hull, *Melissa*, 1930, o/c, Mississippi Museum of Art.

BELOW RIGHT: William Hollingsworth, *Elevator, Tower Building*, o/board, Mississippi Museum of Art, bequest of Jane Oakley Hollingsworth.

she had a closer awareness of him in 1939 when he spent weekends on leave from the state hospital at Whitfield with Marie Hull.

The Gulf Coast was also the home of Dusti Swetman Bongé (1903-1993) of Biloxi, one of the few southern artists whose art was solidly in the modernist school. After her marriage to Archie Bongé, an artist, the couple and their young son moved back to her hometown of Biloxi in 1934. At the death of her husband two years later, she immersed herself in art. She began to record Biloxi scenes in oil and watercolor, sketches of the camps where shrimp pickers lived. She continued to work in Biloxi until her death at the age of ninety in 1993.

After riding out the Depression, Welty made the decision to stay at home. In subsequent years she frequently traveled for pleasure and to give lectures and readings, and she worked at the *New York Times* in the summer of 1944. The accretions of memory, which she called "the treasure most dearly regarded by me," fed her stories, characters, landscapes, and dialogue. She lived in Jackson the rest of life, writing with quiet power and eloquence, stories, novels, essays, and book reviews. In her writing, photography, and personal life, she fulfilled her continuing wish "to part a curtain, that invisible shadow that falls between people, the veil of indifference to each other's presence, each other's wonder, each other's human plight." Her literary career spanned eight decades and brought her virtually every honor possible in the literary world of America.

—Adapted from Patti Carr Black's essay "Back Home in Jackson" in the accompanying exhibition catalogue.

