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Doris Emrick Lee



Known as the “colony of the arts,” Woodstock, New York has been home to some of the most famed and talented artists in Hudson River Valley history. While the town of Woodstock is most well known for the famous counter-culture musical festival of 1969, its artistic history actually began long before that, in the early 1900s. The Maverick Art Colony was just one of the several artistic colonies located in Woodstock that produced many well-known and accomplished artists, including Doris Emrick Lee. During the 1930s and 1940s, Lee reached her peak of popularity with works published in magazines, murals in federal post offices, and paintings displayed in the nations most renowned museums. Doris Lee’s life experiences, including her life in Woodstock, had a great effect on her work and career.

Biography

Lee was born Doris Emrick in Aledo, Illinois in 1905 to a merchant-banker father and a home-maker mother. She described her upbringing as that of “an outdoorsy

gentlewoman,” and attended an upscale school in nearby Lake Forest, Illinois.¹ Though Lee was always interested in art, she was encouraged by her father to obtain a general education. Lee received her degree in philosophy from Rockford College in Illinois, and afterward returned to her true passion of art. After some time painting and studying in Europe, Lee returned to America where she continued her study of art, first at the Art Institute of Kansas City and then at the California School of Fine Art in San Francisco.

In 1927, at the age of twenty-two Doris Emrick wed Russell Lee, a chemical engineer turned painter. The couple led a happy life that was filled with their passion for art and painting. In 1931, at the suggestion of their mutual friend Arnold Blanch, the Lees relocated to Woodstock, New York to live in the Maverick Art Colony.

Maverick Art Colony

The Maverick Art Colony was founded in 1905, by Hervey White. White, who lived on and ran the Maverick colony for the entirety of his life, was a socially-minded individual who was very active in the arts and crafts movement. After spending some time at Hull House in Chicago, and establishing a small crafts company in Chicago, White decided to take his ideas one step further. He partnered up with acquaintances Ralph Radcliffe Whitehead and Jane Byrd McCall to design plans for an artists' colony located in Woodstock, NY. The colony was to be known as Byrdcliffe.²

Byrdcliffe started off successfully in Woodstock. The town was facing an economic downfall due to a decrease in farming and a downfall in the bluestone (a type

¹ “Violence” in *Time*, 6 April 1936. Accessed 3/30/2007.
www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,848456,00.html

² Wolfe, Tom, “Hervey White’s Maverick Colony and its Artists” in *The Maverick: Hervey White’s Colony of the Arts*, (Woodstock Artists Association and Museum: 2006), 11-31.

of rock ideal for building) business, so the art colony helped to revitalize Woodstock. The colony was established to suit all types of artists, of any craft. It had facilities for furniture building, iron working, weaving, ceramics and painting. White was very interested in the ideas behind the Byrdcliffe colony, such as giving artists a comfortable environment in which to work together. However, as time passed White began to have doubts about Byrdcliffe. Ultimately, his disagreements with Whitehead's beliefs and politics caused him to withdraw from the Byrdcliffe colony. However, White had become so enamored with the scenery of the Woodstock area that he decided to stay nearby. With the help of friend Fritz van der Loo, White purchased a large track of land just outside of Woodstock to build his own artists' colony. White was drawn to the wooded area on the outskirts of the small, artistic town due to his simplistic, non-materialistic views on life.

Divorced from his wife in 1908, White made his home in the barn on the land which would soon be known as Maverick Art Colony. Shortly after, Maverick's first tenant, cellist Paul Kefer, settled into the colony. Many other musicians followed and small homes were built on the land to house the new tenants. To finance a well on the land White asked his tenants to play in the first Maverick festival in 1915, a celebration of music, theater, painting and many other forms of art. The Maverick festival was last held in 1931 due to financial difficulties brought on by the Great Depression, but is still remembered for its great creativity.³

Along with musicians, the Maverick colony attracted painters, sculptors and writers. White established the Maverick press in 1910 in order to help himself and other lesser-known writers get their works published. Shortly after, a lithograph press for artists was also installed. Over the years, the Maverick colony produced many great, successful

³ Wolfe, 11-31.

artists. Pierre Henrotte, a musician, became the concertmaster of the Metropolitan Opera. Leon Barzin, Jr. played violin in the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and helped to found the New York City Ballet. In 1919 the artists of the colony banded together, along with others from the Brydcliffe colony and the town of Woodstock, to form the Woodstock Artists Association in order to show their works in town. This organization, which still exists today, helped new artists display their works and was where many of the great artists got their start.⁴

After the Lee's moved to Woodstock in 1931 their careers quickly grew. In the early 1930s Doris Lee entered the Woodstock Artists Association shows and was able to showcase her work. In 1935 Russell Lee gave up painting and turned to photography. He was hired by the Farm Security Administration to document the Great Depression across America with other famed photographers, such as Dorothea Lange. While Lee was on his cross-country travels, the couple's marriage dissolved. In 1938 the Lee's divorced and Russell Lee got married for a second time to newspaper reporter Jean Smith.⁵

While her ex-husband was traveling the country, Doris Lee was achieving success in Woodstock. During the time that Russell Lee had been on the road, Doris Lee had fallen in love with Arnold Blanch, the couple's long-time friend. Blanch, who was married to fellow artist and Maverick resident Lucille Blanch, got divorced in order to be with Lee. Soon after, the two married and made a new home for themselves, also at the Maverick Art Colony.

From the time Doris Lee moved to the Maverick Art Colony in 1931 she had been painting and displaying her works in Woodstock galleries, where they were met with

⁴ Wolfe, 11-31.

⁵ "Russell Lee: 1930s and '40s Vintage Photographs from the FSA and Standard Oil Projects," on *Lee Gallery: Fine 19th and 20th Century Photographs*. Accessed 3/22/2007. www.leegallery.com/prejune.html

great success. One day in 1935 Lee found out two pieces of great news. Her painting *Thanksgiving*, which depicts three generations of American women in a kitchen preparing for a Thanksgiving meal, was awarded the Chicago Art Institute's prestigious five-hundred dollar Logan Prize and added to the permanent art collection of the institute. In addition, she learned the very same day that she had been selected to paint murals for the Great Depression relief program from artists, the Section of Fine Arts in the Works Progress Administration. Supervised by the Treasury Department, Lee would be painting murals for two federal post offices: one in Washington, D.C. (now the Environmental Protection Agency Building) and one in Summerville, Georgia.⁶

Works

Doris Lee's work was featured in many prestigious museums and exhibits throughout the country. As early as 1936 Lee was doing solo shows of her works in both Washington, D.C. and New York City. She also had her own studio in New York City where she created much of her work, including the murals for the Great Depression program. Lee painted four murals for that project, two for each post office selected. All of the murals for the federal buildings were "artistic interpretations of history and catalyst for dialogue about the nature of public art."⁷ Before painting *Georgia Countryside* in the post office of Summerville Georgia, Lee spent many months learning about the people, culture and environment of the area so that she could accurately and realistically represent the area in her painting. *Georgia Countryside* was a very realistic painting that captured both black and white people of Georgia out in a field tending to their crops. By

⁶ Trovato, Joseph. "Interview with Doris Lee" from *Smithsonian Archives of American Art*, (Woodstock, NY: 4 Nov. 1964). Accessed 4/1/2007. www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/lee64.htm

⁷ www.gas.gov/gas/cm_attachments/GSA_DOCUMENT/Ariel_Rios_Brochure_Final2_R2-w-x36_0Z5RD

including both blacks and whites in the painting, Lee was able to show the plight that all people were experiencing during the depression, and not just limit her painting to those who were better off. The paintings that Lee made for the Washington, D.C. post office, *General Store* and *Post Office and Country Post* were also very realistic and captured the feel of rural mail delivery in America.

In addition to her murals and the acclaimed *Thanksgiving*, Lee produced many other works, of all different styles. *Winter in the Catskills*, inspired by her life in the Hudson River Valley, is featured in the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, along with *Country Wedding* and *Strawberry Pickers*. These three works are all lithographs, or works produced by imprinting an image onto fabric or paper by using a specially prepared stone and grease or another oily substance. *Along the Waterfront*, a much more abstract lithograph, can be found in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

The majority of Lee's works, which were hand-painted and very realistic, are now displayed in other prestigious art museums throughout the country. The Smithsonian American Art Museum houses *Untitled (Two Women on Beach)* and *At the Well*. The Dayton Art Institute in Ohio is home to one of Lee's later works, *Grauman's Chinese Theater, 1945*. This painting was commissioned by *Life* magazine, with whom Lee often worked, to portray the city of Hollywood in art. In this painting, images of Hollywood are shown not only through Grauman's Theater, but also through the black and white movie posters displayed outside of the theater. This painting was completed at the height of

Lee's popularity and was one of her last works painted in a realistic manner, before she moved into more abstract paintings in the later 1940s.⁸

Style

Lee is most well-known for her ability to capture the small, ordinary elements of life in still paintings with amazing detail and sincerity. According to Robert Henkes, Lee has been “acknowledged as a recorder of rural life” who had an obsession with detail.⁹ One important aspect of Lee's painting style is her ability to connect with the viewers. Lee was painting at a very difficult time during American history when the country was suffering from the Great Depression and then was fighting in World War II. By painting the simple things in life that meant a lot to people, like family and special occasions, Lee was able to help alleviate the pain and sorrow of the nation by refocusing people's minds.¹⁰ Many of these paintings were focused on rural America, such as *Country Wedding*, which shows family and friends gathering outside of a country church just as the wedding inside has finished. Lee's attention to detail is also stressed in this painting through the inclusion of birds in the sky (one of her trademarks), mountains in the distance, a watering pump in front of the church and a windmill in the back. Not only is there great detail in such a simple setting, but *Country Wedding* also demonstrates Lee's ability to include many different fields of vision in her paintings, giving the viewer several different areas at which to look, all filled with detail and activity.

⁸ Carr, Eileen, “Grauman's Chinese Theater, 1945: Art in Context,” from *The Dayton Art Institute*. Accessed 3/20/2007.

<http://tours.daytonartinstitute.org/accessart/object.cfm?TT=gt&TN=pps2&ID=47&COM=ac>

⁹ Henkes, Robert, *American Women Painters of the 1930s and 1940s: The Lives and Works of Ten Artists*, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc.; 1991), 1.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Doris Lee had many unique elements infused into her paintings. One trademark of Lee's was the inclusion of birds in almost every painting. The birds were not the focal point of the paintings, but they did stand as another form of movement in each piece. Another trademark of Lee's was her depiction of rural life. Many of Lee's paintings focused on farms and fields and the simple side of life. While she did spend quite a bit of time in New York City, and had success with some paintings focused on the area such as *Catastrophe*, Lee preferred to paint rural or small-town America. Lee also had a tendency to include paths or trails in almost all of her works, which lead the viewer in and out of the painting.¹¹ The main thing that Doris Lee was known for in her paintings was the ability to capture the simple things in life. These simple things were especially important during the Depression years in America. While others might have been overcome by the financial difficulties and the hardship that was widespread in the country, Lee was able to use the Great Depression as a source of inspiration. She was able to pull the things out of life which really meant something and capture them in her paintings, like the three generations of women cooking together in *Thanksgiving*, and children ice-skating in *Winter in the Catskills*.¹² These elements, like the outdoors and one's home and family, were what really mattered to Lee, therefore she worked to capture how special and meaningful they were in her paintings.

Hudson River Valley

Although Lee had roots in Illinois and spent her last years in Florida, Doris Lee had a special connection with the Hudson River Valley. Most important was her time

¹¹ Henkes, 9.

¹² Henkes, 1-30.

spent at the Maverick Art Colony, where the scenery and environment of the colony nurtured her creativity. Without the help of the many other artists and the artistic environment that existed in Woodstock, Lee probably would not have achieved the same level of success that she did in the 1930s and 1940s. Her first really successful painting, *Autumn, Landscape and Hunter*, illustrated her life at Maverick. In it, a man is hunting foxes in the barren woods; to add a sense of mystery to the painting Lee includes two foxes, one which the hunter can see and one that is hidden from the hunter, but not the viewer. The area captured in the painting was meant to depict the area where Arnold Blanch hunted for food while at Maverick. It also beautifully showcased the fall foliage that upstate New York is famous for with the many shades of orange and red that were used. The contrast between the trees shedding their leaves and the dark, cloudy sky directs the viewers focus on to the beautiful scenery that the Woodstock area was so well known for, and that Lee loved.¹³

Lee had several other paintings which focused on the Hudson River Valley and the area she had become so fond of. *Winter in the Catskills*, previously mentioned as one of Lee's famed lithographs, captures Lee's energy and enthusiasm for painting. It also captures the beauty and joy of the Catskills with children ice-skating in the foreground, mountains rising in the background, and once again, birds flying overhead.¹⁴ Another painting of Lee's that focused on the Hudson River was *Hudson River Excursion*. This painting is once again filled with energy and depicts a sightseeing riverboat full of tourists traveling on the beautiful Hudson River. The energy of the painting spills from

¹³ Photo can be found in *The Maverick: Hervey White's Colony of the Arts*, pg 82.

¹⁴ Henkes, 10 and 18.

the boat to the water and the sky, all of which helps to capture the beauty of the Hudson River Valley.¹⁵

Doris Lee was a well-traveled woman who had gained an immense amount of popularity around the world. Lee was employed by *Life* magazine on several occasions for her artwork; one such commission found her in Mexico making drawings of Pre-Columbian artifacts, which she collected and brought home. Despite her global successes and her love for travel, Lee still chose to make her permanent home in Woodstock, NY.¹⁶ Lee and Blanch were both artists who drew inspiration from the beautiful scenery which surrounded them at Woodstock; therefore, they chose to have both their home and studios located just outside of Woodstock even after they left the Maverick Art Colony. The home that Lee and Blanch built for themselves was known for its simplicity; it was designed with an abundance of wall space and many windows so that the house was always awash in natural light. Both Lee and Blanch had separate bedrooms, bathrooms and studios which overlooked a beautiful view of the Catskill Mountains and provided them with constant inspiration to produce beautiful paintings.¹⁷

Legacy

Even though Doris Lee passed away in the 1980s, she is still greatly remembered for her great artistic skills throughout the Woodstock community. Lee's works can be found in the permanent collection of the Woodstock Artists Association and Museum, as well as special exhibits in museums and galleries throughout the area. The Woodstock Artists Association and Museum (WAAM), known as the "local Louvre," was originally

¹⁵ Henkes, 6.

¹⁶ Trovato, "Interview with Doris Lee."

¹⁷ Trovato, "Interview with Doris Lee".

known as the Woodstock Artists Association and was the organization formed by artists from Woodstock, the Maverick Colony and Brydcliffe in 1919. Since its opening in 1920 it has been the leading art museum for current and past artists of the Woodstock area.¹⁸

Lee stands out as one of the most successful female painters to be produced at the Woodstock art colony. Lee's work was always filled with detail and energy, as well as love for her work and what she was painting. Her works ranged from rural landscapes, to lithographs and abstract paintings in her later years, yet she always managed to capture what was important to her in her work. These important things, like her family and the natural environment surrounding her, were drawn from her real life. Doris Lee led a happy life with her second husband Arnold Blanch in the Town of Woodstock, where they settled into the environment in order to continue their work. This immersion in the Hudson River Valley area greatly influenced Lee's work, as can be seen through her stress on the small, important things in life which were not always material, a belief that was cultivated at Hervey White's Maverick Art Colony where Lee's great artistic career began.

¹⁸ "History" on *Woodstock Artists Association and Museum*. Accessed 19 April 2007. www.woodstockart.org/history/organization.htm

Important Paintings



Spillway (1940) From the Woodstock Artists Association Permanent Collection



Thanksgiving (1935) From the Art Institute of Chicago Permanent Collection



Country Wedding (1942) From the Albright-Knox Art Gallery.



Winter in the Catskills (1936) From the Madison Art Center.



Georgia Countryside (1939) WPA mural in Summerville, Georgia Post Office



Grauman's Chinese Theater, 1945 (1945) From the Dayton Art Institute

