

HETAG: The Houston Earlier Texas Art Group

HETAG Newsletter No. 43, July/August 2020

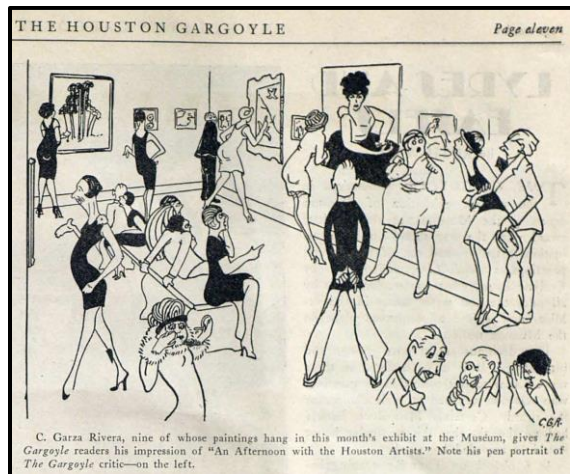
The Artfully Distanced Issue

Remember what it used to be like, way back in February, when we could all get together in person for HETAG meetings, CASETA symposiums and other Earlier Houston/Texas Art events? Oh, how we miss those days, and how cavalier some of us were in taking such luxuries for granted (actually, I speak only for myself). And how we long for their return.

Many museums, galleries and individual artists have valiantly offered online stopgaps, some very successful, but it's not the same, of course. Some of our art museums around the state have courageously reopened with reassuring safety protocols - including the [Museum of Fine Arts, Houston](#), the first major art museum in the country to reopen. We've gone weekly to MFAH ever since the reopening, and have found our visits to be comforting respites in these troubling times. MFAH, and our other art museums, we promise never again to take you for granted! Many galleries have also reopened, by appointment or with limited occupancy, and we thank them too.

At the time of writing, in late July, there's a glimmer of hope that the trend, in Houston, at least, might be in the right direction. Still, it will likely be a long time before we're able to get back together in person. We might attempt a Zoom meeting in the fall if there's interest (and if some of us can master the technology). But for now we make do day-by-day by looking at some art – online, or in the galleries when we can – by buying some if our budgets allow (remember, artists and gallerists need to make a living too), and by donating as we can to help our museums and other organizations get through to the other side. And by perusing the HETAG Newsletter, of course.

This issue of the Newsletter includes the tale of bringing a major Houston painting back to life, recounted by Michael Grauer; info about the work of some important Houston Black artists included in the exhibition *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, currently on view at MFAH; suggestions of important recent books including Earlier Houston/Texas Art that can help fill some stay-at-home hours; and listings of some current or upcoming exhibitions around Texas. So, until we can meet again, enjoy some Earlier Houston Art and stay safe.



Frank Freed *Opening Night* – Contemporary Arts Museum 1953,
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Gift of the Eleanor and Frank Freed Foundation (l);
C. Garza Rivera *An Afternoon with the Houston Artists* From *The Houston Gargoyle*, April 17, 1928 (r).

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John Biggers in His Studio 1986, by Earlie Hudnall, Jr.

Houston Black Artists in *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* Museum of Fine Arts, Houston Thru August 30, 2020

This groundbreaking exhibition, organized by the Tate Modern in London, featuring works by more than 60 Black artists, explores what it meant to be a Black artist in the United States during the tumultuous era that spanned the 1960s to the early 1980s.

Black Art in Houston

Artists John Thomas Biggers and Carroll Harris Simms arrived in Houston in 1949 and 1950, respectively, to found a department of art at the Texas State University for Negroes (now Texas Southern University). During segregation, historically Black colleges and universities such as TSU were essential to the education of Black students and artists. Biggers and Simms not only taught the fundamentals of art making, they strove to instill self-pride and self-identity in their students, including the acclaimed painter Kermit Oliver and photographer Earlie Hudnall, Jr.

While teaching, Biggers and Simms also persisted in their studio practices. Biggers was a superb draftsman and painter whose imagery celebrates Black history and heritage. Simms, an accomplished ceramicist and sculptor of figurative forms from a Pan-African and spiritual perspective, produced numerous public commissions across the globe. With careers spanning more than five decades, these artists left indelible marks on the city of Houston.



Works by John Biggers included in the exhibition (r).

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, has added, for the showing here, Houston Black artists, John Biggers, Carroll Harris Sims, Kermit Oliver and Earlie Hudnall, Jr., all associated with the art program established by Dr. Biggers at Texas Southern University in the 1950s. This is an unmissable opportunity for HETAGers and other Houstonians to see the art of these Houston artists in the wider national context in which they worked, and which they helped shape.



Works by Carroll Harris Sims (l) and Kermit Oliver (r) in the exhibition.

Note: At time of writing, MFAH is open Wednesday thru Sunday with safety measures in place, making it an oasis of art comfort during these trying times. *Soul of a Nation* is included with general admission, best secured in advance online [here](#).

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HOUSTON ART HISTORY NOTES: NEW LIFE FOR A MAJOR TEXAS PAINTING BY A HOUSTON ARTIST, as recounted by Michael Grauer.



Ruth Pershing Uhler in 1927 (l); her painting *Growth* c1934 (c); and Uhler painting in 1939 (r).

RUTH PERSHING UHLER (1895-1967)

Growth, circa 1934 Oil on canvas

Panhandle-Plains Historical Society Museum, Gift of Henri Gadbois and Leila Gadbois.
1995.245.1

This is how I remember the tale:

In 1995, Henri Gadbois and Leila McConnell approached me about a larger Ruth Uhler painting Henri had rescued from Ruth before she could burn it. The canvas was rolled and the paint layer extremely friable; it was a wreck. But, I could see it was a great painting with nearly life-size figures of three women, the central figure of which grouping looked a lot like Ruth Uhler to me. However, as the first two priorities of any museum are preservation and education (we cannot educate about the thing, whatever that thing is, unless we have the thing), I needed to determine if we could at least preserve the painting. I consulted with now-retired paintings conservator, David Spangler, who had worked in the Texas Conservation Center at the Panhandle-Plains Historical Society Museum in the late 1980s and early 1990s before returning to private practice. David continued to conserve paintings for the Museum until his retirement. He is one of the best I have ever seen. David felt the painting could be preserved and even conserved, perhaps even stabilized enough to be exhibitable. Conservators are notoriously conservative in these type situations and all objects they treat can be unpredictable.

So, on behalf of the Panhandle-Plains Historical Society Museum, I accepted the painting into the permanent collection in 1995, hoping that at some point, someday, conservation monies would be made available. In 2005, those funds became available. We sent the painting to

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Ruth Pershing Uhler's *GROWTH*, as received at PPHM (l); and during restoration (r).

David's studio in Wisconsin and he discovered he could stabilize the friable paint layer and in paint conservatively those areas of loss. What David Spangler did with the painting was nothing short of a miracle. It was truly a phoenix-like treatment. I believe the painting is one of the top 100 Texas paintings of all time.

While waiting for a decade to have the painting treated, I tasked myself with researching it. What was this mysterious painting called? Where did it fit in Uhler's *oeuvre*? After having curated one of the first early Texas women artists' exhibitions in decades in 1993, women artists of the American West became an interest area for me. (Grauer notes that this magnificent painting was acquired by PPHM contemporaneously with the national exhibition *Independent Spirits: Women Painters of the American West, 1890-1945*, to which his research contributed.)

My research on the painting revealed that Ruth Uhler showed *Growth* at the 10th Houston Annual in 1934. My art historical interpretation of the painting is an allegory of Texas womanhood, i.e., the growth of a Texas woman, overseen by Mother Texas. I contend the central figure is a Uhler self-portrait. As the father of two Texas women, the painting has great personal meaning to me. I believe it should be on the cover of the forthcoming book on women artists of Texas.



Details of *Growth* before restoration.

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Under my curatorship, Panhandle-Plains had been actively collecting early Texas art since about 1988 when the Museum purchase a damaged Hermann Lungkwitz painting (again conserved by David Spangler) from the Bickler Estate auction at Valley House Gallery. A subset of the Museum's collecting focus during my tenure was Texas women artists. With a major collection of sculptures by Waldine Tauch and paintings by Olive Vandruff and Florence McClung, the Museum had a good foundation to start. The Uhler acquisition in 1995 led to other acquisitions of works by Houston artists. A. C. Cook had already donated Virgie Lowenstein Claxton's magnolia still life in 1992. Joseph Thomas Bloxsom donated Robert Preusser's *Metronome* (1940-41), and another Preusser gouache, in memory of the J.D. Browder Family of the Diamond Tail Ranch, upon the suggestion of Alison de Lima Greene in 1996. Patricia John Keightley donated a number of her mother's paintings to the Museum along with paintings her mother owned by Beulah Schiller Ayars in 1999. Among the Ayars paintings were her nude self-portrait, *She is I*, shown at the Houston Annual, and her excellent character study, *Negro Girl (Mary)*, also shown at the 1934 Houston Annual. In 2006, the Museum's Friends of Southwestern Art purchased Ola McNeill Davidson's important oil, *Cannas*, from Sandy Parkerson Gallery. Through Rusty Tether, the family of sculptor Ruth Van Loon Harrell donated a nude female torso in terra cotta by Harrell. Finally, major supporter Scott Higginbotham donated an excellent early still life of roses by Emma Richardson Cherry.

When I left Canyon in 2018, there were 63 women artists of Texas represented in the Museum's early Texas art collections. Most of those art objects came while I was there. The early Texas art collection at Panhandle-Plains, and the Museum's ETA exhibition record between 1987 and 2018, are among my proudest achievements of my 36-year museum career. Ruth Uhler's *Growth* ranks as one of my favorite and most significant acquisitions. Much obliged.

Michael R. Grauer, McCasland Chair of Cowboy Culture/Curator of Cowboy Collections and Western Art, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City

(Michael Grauer served as curator of art, and in additional capacities, at Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum for more than three decades. His contributions to the preservation, understanding and exhibition of Texas art have been, shall we say, Texas-size!)



Note: Some will remember that Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum generously lent Uhler's *Growth* for the exhibition *Planned, Organized and Established: Houston Artist Cooperatives in the 1930s*, on view in the Ideson Gallery at Houston Public Library in 2017, where it hung for three months facing the also glorious *Patterns: Portrait of Ruth Pershing Uhler*, by Grace Spaulding John, 1932, from the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, gift of Patricia John Keightley and John Spaulding John.

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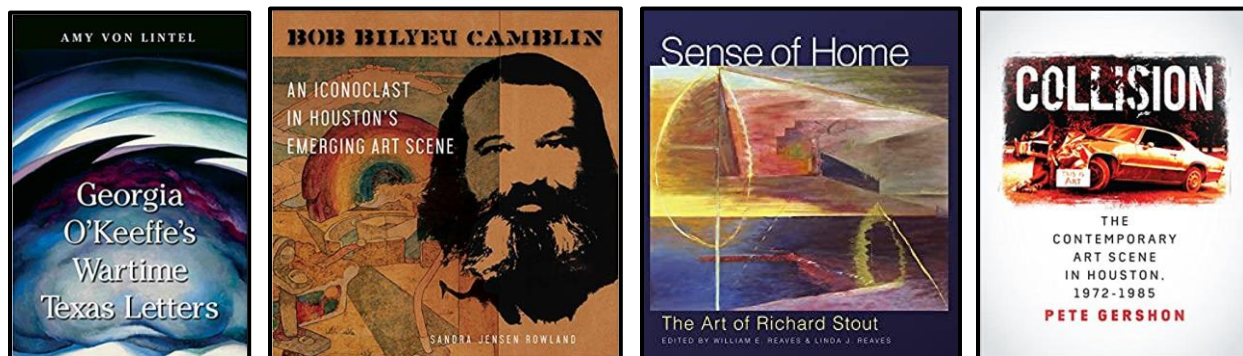
Recent books of interest:



Emma Richardson Cherry *On the Gallery, at the Pines* 1896 (l) and *Normandy Fields* c1888/89 (r).

In the just published [America's Impressionism: Echoes of a Revolution \(Yale University Press, 2020\)](#), Houston's own Emma Richardson Cherry, and other Texas Impressionists, join the pantheon of other American Impressionists for a new look at how that movement spread across our country in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. This is the catalog of an exhibition that will tour nationally – delayed by the pandemic, but currently scheduled for the [San Antonio Museum of Art in Summer 2021](#). William Keyse Rudolph, curator of the Texas section of the exhibition, gives ample credit to ER Cherry for mounting the first exhibition in Texas “to deliberately feature works labeled as Impressionist” in 1896, and for her early work, in 1888 and 1889, at Giverny, the iconic embodiment of Impressionism in the general imagination. The catalog features the two of Cherry's Impressionist paintings above (though only *On the Gallery* will be in the show), placing her work in the context of American Impressionism along with such more famous artists as Mary Cassatt, Willard Metcalf and many others, including her teacher, William Merritt Chase. Both the catalog and the exhibition bring long overdue attention to contributions of Cherry, and other Texas artists, in the national and international art worlds of their time. Listen to Rudolph's talk on Texas Impressionist Artists at the [2019 Witte Museum Conference on Texas here](#).

Have a look also at these recent titles from [Texas A&M University Press](#), selected from among the large group of books they have published relating to Texas Art. TAMU Press has been particularly active in publishing art related books, many with direct connections to Houston and/or CASETA: Center for the Advancement and Study of Early Texas Art. TAMU Press is the publisher of the forthcoming CASETA sponsored work, *Making the Unknown Known: Women In Early Texas Art* (now in press, publication projected for 2021). PS: They're even having a summer sale now.



And until your copies of the books arrive, you can get a taste of the delights in store by watching presentations at past CASETA symposiums by [Amy Von Lintel on Georgia O'Keeffe in Texas](#); and [Richard Stout in conversation](#) about his long art career in Houston and elsewhere.

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Exhibitions, current and forthcoming:

A Collection of Friends: Selections from the William F. Lassiter Estate Benefiting the Menil Collection and the University of Saint Thomas

[Inman Gallery, Houston](#)

August 8 – September 4, 2020, by appointment

Inman Gallery is pleased to honor William F. Lassiter with an exhibition of selected artwork from his collection. Bill was a fierce supporter of emerging artists, often being the first to purchase a young artist's work. Work from the 1950's to 2017 will be presented. For a checklist of available work, or for further information, please contact Kerry Inman at kerry@inmangallery.com or 713-526-7800. Register for the gallery e-newsletter (at the website www.inmangallery.com) to stay on top of the show.

[David McManaway: Cult of the Commonplace](#)

The Grace Museum, Abilene

Thru January 9, 2021

“This exhibition presents a long overdue review of important work from artist, David McManaway's prodigious 50 year career to reexamine his role as a major artist and influencer in Texas and beyond.”

[Texas Made Modern: The Art of Everett Spruce](#)

Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth

August 18 – November 1, 2020

“Experience the Texas landscape like you've never seen it before. The most celebrated painter from Texas in the first half of the twentieth century, Everett Spruce (1908–2002) was widely collected by museums across the country, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and more. His modern, visionary landscapes countered the mythic images of Texas as only a land of cattle and cowboys. Over time, however, with the rise of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, Spruce and his work fell into obscurity. This exhibition resurrects Spruce's career and returns it to its place in the history of American art.”

The mission of HETAG is to illuminate Houston's art history by providing viewing opportunities for art, by supporting and doing research on the artists and art communities working in Houston through the years, and by spreading the word.

Back issues of the HETAG Newsletter are available via the

[University of Houston Libraries Digital Library](#)

and

[The Portal to Texas History](#)

**Randy Tibbits, coordinator
HETAG: The Houston Earlier
Texas Art Group
tibbits@rice.edu**