

FLORA CROCKETT (1892-1979)

BIOGRAPHY

In 1966, at the age of 74, Flora Crockett embarked on what would become the most productive years of her artistic career. The paintings she produced between 1966 and 1973 display a vitality, joy, and confidence that resulted from a lifetime of exploration, experience, and struggle. Crockett's colorful abstractions introduce a new name to the story of art in the 20th century.

By the time Crockett started work on this series, she had been active as an artist, teacher, and art administrator for more than forty years. Her paintings were shown in exhibitions in Paris and New York throughout the 1930s and 1940s, and her position as Director of Fernand Léger's Académie Moderne in Paris placed her at the center of one of the most influential art communities of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, her life and career over those decades had not been easy. Her personal papers tell a story of courage, tenacity, and repeated frustrations as she sought to do her work and earn a living. It is an all too familiar tale of an independent woman fighting for her place in the world.

Flora Crockett was born in 1892 in Grelton, Ohio and attended Oberlin College, where she majored in art and mathematics. After graduating from Oberlin in 1911, she attended Thomas Training School in Detroit, Michigan, where she studied to become an instructor in art. In 1915, she took a position as Supervisor of Art in the public school district in Roslyn, New York. In Roslyn, she met Edmondo Quattrochi, an Italian-born sculptor who was then living on Long Island and undertaking sculptural commissions in marble and bronze. The two were married in 1918 and lived for the next few years in Roslyn.

In 1924, Flora and Edmondo moved to France when Edmondo was hired to work with Frederick MacMonnies in executing his *La Liberté éplorée* (Liberty Weeping), a monumental memorial sculpture honoring Americans who died at the First Battle of the Marne. For the first few years in France, Flora took a position as director of L'Ecole de Champfleury, a school for war orphans at Poissy. Then, probably around 1926, she joined the Académie Moderne, an art school established by Fernand Léger at 86 rue Notre-Dame des Champs in Paris, and was eventually named Director of the school.

Léger began teaching at the Académie Moderne in 1924, and the following year Amédée Ozenfant joined the faculty. The years spent working with Léger and Ozenfant were critical to Crockett's artistic formation. A full history of the Académie Moderne has yet to be written, but there is no doubt that it had a lasting and far-reaching effect on artists worldwide and for decades to come. The student body was international, including artists from Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, Russia, South America, and Japan, as well as a few students from the United States (including

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Blanche Lazzell and George L.K. Morris). Crockett's five-year tenure there put her in regular contact with Léger, Ozenfant, and others, who were among the most important and influential artists of the era.

Photographs of Crockett's work during these years – compositions of disparate objects pared down to their essentials – suggest that Léger's teachings were key to her pictorial conception. She was given a one-person show at Galerie La Fenêtre Ouverte on the rue Lincoln in 1937. She also participated in the Salon Surindépendant three years running and in the 1937 International Exposition in Paris, where her painting was awarded a bronze medal by the French government.

Meanwhile, Flora's relationship with Edmondo was becoming increasingly strained. She complained of his drinking and womanizing and by 1933, the situation had deteriorated enough for her to initiate divorce proceedings in the French court. Their dispute dragged on for several years before her divorce was finally granted in 1937. By this time, too, the political situation in Europe was becoming increasingly perilous, and so after thirteen years abroad, Flora left Paris and returned to the United States in December 1937.

Arriving in New York City, she took an apartment at 233 West 14th Street, where she would reside for the rest of her life. Within months, she established a relationship with the dealer Blanche Bonestell, who ran the Bonestell Gallery on 57th Street, and consigned a group of paintings to her for sale. She also got work through the WPA to teach and direct an art program in Potsdam, New York and showed her work in the public library there in 1939. A photograph of her taken with a group of mural artists in Brooklyn in 1940, along with a group of mural studies retained by her family, suggest that she also participated in the WPA mural program.

With the outbreak of World War II, Crockett took a job as an as an inspector of artillery parts. Government work continued after the war at the New York Naval shipyard. These and a variety of engineering and design jobs supplemented her income throughout the 1940s and 1950s, while she continued to exhibit her work at the Provincetown Art Association and in an exhibition of the Bombshell Artists Group at the Riverside Museum in New York City. A one-person exhibition at the Bonestell Gallery followed in 1946, but subsequent efforts to show her work met with little success.

It is hard to know what prompted her return to painting in the mid-1960s. During her years in Paris, Crockett would have had to confront the problem of whether to embrace a cubist-inspired abstraction that retained recognizable subject matter, or to abandon referential pictorial content to create a purely non-objective composition. She had worked through these ideas in her early compositions, eventually eliminating any figural remnants and paring down her imagery to a limited visual vocabulary of geometric and biomorphic forms. Perhaps because she had

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confronted these questions years earlier, she was able to quickly and clearly define the parameters of her work when she decided to undertake these paintings in the 1960s.

A series of sketches found in her studio show a system of working that drove her production for the next seven years. The drawings, done in sketchbooks or on any available scrap of paper, are each numbered and dated, and serve as frameworks for the paintings (fig. 1). It is a method that provided infinite variation. Although the drawings at first appear random and improvisational, closer inspection reveals an innate sense of balance and structure. Calligraphic lines meander along the page, occasionally looping back on themselves. There are virtually no changes, erasures, or second thoughts. (In only one instance does she scratch out several lines to eliminate them from the final composition.) The resulting shapes, sometimes shaded with cross-hatched lines to suggest color and hue, are then transposed in paint to a canvas board with a brightly colored palette of red, blue, pink, orange, green, and yellow, and only a trace of gesture. It is possible to see echoes of Léger and Ozenfant here, but Crockett eschews their static orderliness and restrained palette in favor of dynamic fluidity and exuberant color. The floating, overlapping forms simultaneously suggest flatness and depth, movement and stability. The juxtaposition of colors activates the eye. Hard edges are occasionally softened or modulated, and create visual vibrations as one area of color bumps up against another. The paintings are crisp and controlled, but also light and playful. There is a sense of freedom in this body of work that comes from a lifetime of experience, a sense of painting for the pure joy of it, and of allowing the forms to find themselves.