

REVIEW

BETTY MUNRO'S SYRACUSE

Slices of local life
for sale at OHA

KATHERINE RUSHWORTH
CONTRIBUTING WRITER



Artists have often played the role of documentarian; training their eyes (and ears) on the layers of life

that define place and populace. Such was the role of Syracuse-watercolorist Betty Munro as she captured the rhythms of life throughout the Syracuse region with a particular fondness for the downtown area.

Through Jan. 25, visitors to the Onondaga Historical Association can enjoy a retrospective of Munro's 30-plus years of painting scenes of Syracuse; slices of life that capture the pulse of a city. From the city's heartbeat at Columbus Circle to the bucolic charms of the surrounding suburbs, Munro painted the warp and weft that was the fabric of Syracuse.

"Munro was a local downtown icon for more than 20 years," Tom Hunter, assistant director/curator of collections at OHA, tells me during a recent visit to OHA.

All of the more than 50 framed paintings on view in the galleries are available for purchase and there are also several dozen unframed paintings for sale in the gift shop.

The OHA is the exclusive local agent for Munro's work, entering into a consignment agreement with the artist's family for the sale of the works. Munro died in 2013. This show, Hunter tells me, is twofold.

"We wanted to combine a retrospective exhibition of her (Munro's) work along with letting the community know the paintings are for sale," he explains.

The show includes work from the early 1960s through the mid-1990s, making Munro a fixture in the local landscape



Betty Munro painted the sights and scenes of Syracuse for more than three decades. Columbus Circle, as seen in this watercolor, was among her favorite subjects. (Provided photo)

for more than three decades.

In one engaging photo, we see her at Columbus Circle with a paintbrush in hand, folding table by her side and a Hills Brothers coffee can on top holding water for rinsing her brushes.

Her affection for this particular site, Columbus Circle, is apparent with "Columbus Circle and Court House" (no date) and "Columbus Circle, Cathedral and Baptist Church" (1973), providing two different but recognizable views of this iconic location.

Munro also showed a strong interest in the evolution of Syracuse's cityscape. There are pieces capturing the construction of MONY Tower and phases I and II of Carousel Mall. In fact, one of her most celebrated sets of 27 paintings, titled the "Civic Center Suite," documents the construction of the Mulroy Civic Center in 1975-76. This set of paintings is in the OHA's permanent collection, but not included in this exhibition.

The landscapes also in the mix provide some of the most abstract examples of Munro's style. A couple of portraits — a female nude, "Naked Reflections" (1981) and "Royal Robes" (1982), a

rendering of an exotic male figure in flowing robes —

demonstrate Munro's ability to fully realize the human figure.

Most of the figures we see in her works are simple strokes of paint with little detail.

Munro's style is consistently loose and gestural in style. In fact, she said she preferred watercolor to other media because it allowed her to work quickly and with great immediacy. She completed most of her paintings in about three hours.

What we see in these images are fleeting moments that Munro captured like freeze-frames from a movie and in so doing, she documented pieces of our city and how the people who call it home brought them to life.

Katherine Rushworth was director of the Michael C. Rockefeller Arts Center at State University College at Fredonia.

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