

ART

REVIEW

History the thread in OHA sampler by women

By **Katherine Rushworth**
Contributing writer

The current exhibition at the Onondaga Historical Association is titled “A Life in Art: Highlights of Women Artists in OHA’s Collection,” but it is about far more than women artists. It’s also about the people, places and events that have shaped Onondaga County for centuries and the ways in which these artists were able to support the pursuit of their work.

The show is comprised of 53 works of art by 51 female artists, which represents a full 20 percent of OHA’s permanent collection. There is a broad diversity of media in the exhibition, including oil paintings, watercolors, pencil, pen and ink drawings, sculpture and prints, with the works spanning more than a century of creative output.

It’s important to recognize that this show does not attempt to make broad statements regarding the place or role of women artists in Onondaga County or the broader visual arts community. The curator, Erica Jensen, was limited to the works in OHA’s collection, which has been built through the acquisition and acceptance of objects that are “of historical value to Syracuse or Onondaga County.” In other words, the fact these artists are women was a secondary consideration (if at all) when these works were accepted into the collection.

FEMININE PERSPECTIVE

What the show demonstrates is that the Syracuse community could and can boast a generous and persevering contingent of female artists throughout its history. Some of the works reveal an aspect of the social spectrum the women were living or working within. Others focus on a particular site or event from the community. And in others, the artist



This painting by 19th-century artist Charlotte Hartley Brigham, “Landscape with Stag,” was recently restored. It is in an exhibition at the Onondaga Historical Association that features women artists in Onondaga County in the 19th and 20th centuries. (Onondaga Historical Association)

herself is what’s significant.

We learn that as early as the first half of the 19th century, women were seeking ways to find instruction in drawing or painting — typically, through a spouse, parent or other relative. They weren’t encouraged to find interests outside of the home, but painting seemed to be an acceptable pursuit.

As we see in the 1830 charco-a-on-sand paper drawing by Cordelia Young Willard, the skills and sources of inspiration were often limited to copying images out of books, like Willard’s dark-toned drawing of a castle the artist admired in a book about Switzerland.

While the exhibition’s concentration is on women artists of Onondaga County, it goes far beyond that single focus.

What also rings true

throughout the exhibition is how few of the women were able to earn their livings as artists. Many worked as illustrators, graphic designers, teachers and in other arts-related professions.

A SAMPLING

Anna Olmsted’s portrait of her grandfather, “Mayer Wetherill,” is a very competent oil painting, but what she is best known for is her tenure as the third director of the Everson Museum of Art, where she established the first Ceramic National exhibition in 1932. She also served as the critic for Syracuse newspapers from 1923 to 1945.

Louise Shrimpton is represented by a delicate pen-and-ink drawing of the “Old Court House” dated 1942. The drawing demonstrates strong draw-

ing skills, which Shrimpton put to use as a designer for Gustav Stickley and Syroco.

Places and familiar scenes are important subject matter for many of the artists. Betty Munro is among the more familiar names in this show with her 1979 watercolor-on-paper painting titled “Montgomery Street from Columbus Circle,” capturing one of Syracuse’s iconic street scenes.

A late-19th century oil painting by Martha Sherwood Edwards, titled “Conrad Lower House/First Frame House in Onondaga County,” depicts the first erected frame house in Manlius, which is said to have been built in 1792.

And, of course, there are scenes of the Erie Canal with Marian Lapham’s watercolor titled “Erie Canal” from the

Details

What: “A Life in Art: Highlights of Women Artists from OHA’s Collection.”

When: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday through Friday; 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Through June 5.

Where: Onondaga Historical Association, 321 Montgomery St., Syracuse.

Admission: Donations accepted.

Information: 428-1864 or cnyhistory.org.

1970s, portraying a verdant slice of the towpath running along the canal in a rural area.

Three-dimensional work is limited, but visitors to the New York State Fair will recognize the name of Sharon BuMann, known for her commanding butter sculptures. She is also responsible for designing the Jerry Rescue Monument in Clinton Square. BuMann is represented in this exhibition by a clay head sculpture of “Chester Whiteside” (1990), who was the first African-American disc jockey, TV commentator and firefighter in Syracuse.

The strength of this show is its historical content. Curator Jensen has done an outstanding job researching the individual artists and their particular subject matter and has written wall text that is both informative and engaging.

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