Margaret Webb Dreyer as a young artist.

Portrait of a Houston Artist: An Interview with Margaret Webb Dreyer

Martin Dreyer

Everyone called her Maggie — that is, everyone but me.

Tall, dark-haired, genial, she was the life of the Houston literary party where we first met. We were married by a portly, beaming justice of the peace and honeymooned at her family's place on nearby Clear Lake. Let me hereby say, for the record, that there's no truth to the scurrilous rumor that she took along her easel, canvases, brushes and paints on our honeymoon trip.

But maybe painting was her greatest love. Painting and people.

Years later, *Who's Who in American Art* gave generous space to listing Margaret Webb Dreyer's accomplishments as award-winning artist, art teacher, owner of a murals company and longtime owner and operator of a pioneer Houston art gallery.

Ann Holmes, the Houston *Chronicle*'s fine arts editor, put it this way:

> She was a prominent and active artist who occupied a definite niche in the Houston art scene. She was a leader whose impact was both personal and artistic. Above all, Maggie was generous and used the Dreyer Galleries to stimulate interest in other artists. The Saturday night 'salons' at the gallery were an important part of Houston's emerging art scene.

Wherever we lived there was a jumble of brushes, paints, canvases and frames. With proper awe I would watch the sure-fingered sweep of her long-handled sable brush — the baton of a Bernstein — and her hot-eyed frenzy as she let the paint fall where it may.

Stylistic routes took her from naturalism to cubism to surrealism to abstract expressionism. Bold strokes, rich colors and textures. Paintings that burst with life and were surely her statements of freedom.

She began making the big shows. Her watercolors, oils and acrylics were exhibited in major museums throughout Texas and other states. She won many awards.

Martin Dreyer is a writer and former longtime newsman with the Houston *Chronicle*. His fiction has appeared in *Esquire, Prairie Schooner* and other publications, and has won star mention in best short story collections. His reflections on the cultural scene, "The Way We Were: Houston's Culture in the 1940's," appeared in Vol. I, No. 1 of *The Houston Review*.

In describing her works, local reviewers indulged in warm personal references: "One of the city's bravest bohemians" . . . "Unconventional" . . . "Her flamboyance always masked an acute sensitivity."

Said Mimi Crossley, then the Houston *Post*'s art writer:

> Maggie's absolute freedom, her hospitality, big floppy hats and committed heart put the art scene in Houston on the side of human rights and general soul. To a large extent, she made it an art-for-artist's scene, and set the stage for those of us who walk on it now.

Our Dreyer Galleries on San Jacinto became the gathering place of artists and other friends and there was seldom a shortage of intellectual and spirited exchange and what a friend, Frederic Hand, once called: "The jolly green spirit of Alcohol." Especially our openings — not your average gallery gatherings — where spirits flowed spritely among the eclectic mix of first-nighters that only a Margaret Dreyer could attract. She had a kind of charisma that drew diverse people together, from scruffy artists to federal judges, from social "items" to good-ol'-boys. She could relate to all of them. Her gestures were large and her style effusive but she was real and her warmth and openness made people feel welcome and important.

The gallery had been Margaret's old family home. She converted the house at a time when only a few galleries braved the Sahara that was then Houston's art scene.

She ran the gallery for more than fifteen years, putting on regular exhibitions featuring recognized artists as well as providing a showcase for young artists whom she believed in and felt deserved a chance.

Candice Hughes, in *Houston Breakthrough*, said: "Always ready with encouragement to a fledging artist, she had the gift of communicating her joy, enthusiasm and love of art."

She pushed their work more than she did her own, tried to encourage them with sales. There's the story of the young artist who needed a break. She told him that his painting had been sold by the gallery. He later spotted the same piece on our apartment wall. Yes, she had bought it herself.

In the late sixties, days of great confrontation, a growing sense of social injustice moved her to active involvement in the human rights and peace movements and working for progressive political candidates. Her activism wasn't based in some abstract ideology. It came from the heart. She just couldn't understand people killing or enslaving each other. She imparted her values to our son, Thorne, who grew up to be a bearded free-lance writer, public relations man and a zealot when it comes to the value and beauty of human life.

The gallery, above which we then lived, knew a time of danger. We had opened our doors to peace gatherings and rallies for progressive political candidates. Once Jane Fonda came to speak in support of antiwar GI's. She climbed up on a chair in the main gallery room and gave her pitch to assorted folks packed around the pre-Columbian sculptures and other obstacles d'art.

Nightriders, who proclaimed themselves members of the Ku Klux Klan, responded to such free speech with red paint splattered across the front of the gallery and .45 calibre bullets shot through our front door.

There came a time when a malignancy was discovered. In those last few years, while she was undergoing intensive treatment, Margaret began painting furiously, intensely, even exuberantly, embracing life in her works. Her final paintings were maybe her best. Near the end, from her bed in M.D. Anderson Hospital, she said to me: "I was just getting to be a really good artist."

She died December 7, 1976, at the age of 65. We'd been married nearly thirty-five years.

Her close friends filled Rothko Chapel to eulogize her and tell "Maggie stories." Many were artists like Bob Riegel who told how "she completely changed my life one afternoon." As a youth living in our neighborhood, he was shooting mockingbirds with his new slingshot. Suddenly he felt a disapproving presence hovering over him. It was my bird-loving wife who, said Bob, "took me in right then and gave me my first art lesson."

Among the many eulogies came an emotional one from then Mayor Fred Hofheinz. It said, in part:

"There are some people who by living their lives, enrich the lives of everyone around them."

A few months later the Contemporary Arts Museum held a showing of Margaret Webb Dreyer's last five works. These large, jewel-toned acrylics were done on unbleached, unsized linen in stained color, with strokes added. They were *Maggie's Songs*.

And then two years later some sixty of her oils, watercolors and acrylics were exhibited at the University of St. Thomas Art Gallery. The show was called *Maggie: A Retrospective*. The paintings were representative of four decades of her work.

The many visitors to the retrospective saw Margaret again in her creations. Paintings done with humor, warmth, rich imagery. They gravitated to the dark pull and social commentary of *War Mother, Earth Spill* and a series of paintings titled *Blueprint for Survival*. In her *Chronicle* review Ann Holmes said this series of abstract paintings "suggest the fortress of the human being, a fretwork of defenses and vulnerabilities."

Under an eight-column headline, Mimi Crossley's review in the *Post* said "this remarkable artist" had all the requisites of being a great painter "except selfishness."

"She put others far ahead of her own needs and claims to time."

But that's the way she wanted it. She was singing her own song.

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The following interview with Margaret Webb Dreyer took place at the home and former gallery of Martin and Margaret Dreyer on July 8, 1976, just five months before her death. The interview was conducted by Louis J. Marchiafava and the transcription edited by Martin Dreyer and Thorne Dreyer. Margaret Dreyer's paintings were photographed by Louis J. Marchiafava.

Q. First, I'd like to ask you about how you began to paint? When did you first discover your talent?

A. Well, I suppose I've painted all my life. My mother always had many art supplies around — paper and crayons and watercolors — and I started painting when I was very young. And then I took art courses in high school and then went to Westmoreland, an all girls school in San Antonio. There I studied with a very fine teacher who had just come back from studying for six years with the young Paris artists and through her I learned much about space-breaking. I learned dynamic symmetry which has helped me all through the years because I have gone more and more abstract in my painting. I also studied at the University of Texas — its school of architecture — and took courses here at the Museum of Fine Arts. I spent one summer with a friend, Anna Dryselius, who kept a summer place in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. Her husband Gunnar Dryselius, was the Swedish Consul General here. She took her son and I took mine and she rented this beautiful old place right down in the heart of town across from the church. I studied there at the Instituto. . . . But I guess in one way I'm really a lot more self-taught than anything else, and I've tried to keep up with the young artists all through the years. I never stayed in my original style, although everybody said they would recognize my early work from what I'm doing now.

Q: Was it during the 1950s when you studied at the Instituto in Mexico?

A: Yes, my son was, I think, about five or six. It was probably in '50, '51.

Q: Was there a particular development in Mexico occurring at that time in art?

A: Well, I think in Mexico there is always that very Mexican touch to everything they do. There was just a beautiful Mexican feeling even with the Canadian artists. There were many Canadian artists who were studying at San Miguel and who had moved there to paint. In fact, Leonard Brooks, who was teaching there, was a Canadian and was the official war correspondent during the war and had taught at the universities in Canada and then was teaching in San Miguel. But over all, the Mexican artists and teachers who were in San Miguel at that time were painting just like they were in New York and not too many were painting that way in Houston. I suppose that I was one of the early abstract painters in Houston. We had very fine portrait painters like Robert Joy who has made quite a reputation in Texas as a portrait artist

because he always has two or three years of people waiting to have their portraits painted. Buck Schiwetz tried to go into abstraction, but his illustrated things were so in demand that he just didn't have the time to do these abstract things that he wanted to do. But I found that in San Miguel they were doing the same thing that young artists were doing all over the world.

Q: During your career did you spend most of your time in the Houston area?

A: Yes, that is true except that we travel. Well, my husband, Martin, was travel editor with the *Chronicle* for many years. Before he was, we went to Mexico at least once a year and spent a lot of time in Mexico. But we're travellers and I have been to quite a few places in the world. We had a summer place down on Clear Lake that was built by an old sea captain before the 1900 storm. It was anchored to the ground with cables and set in concrete posts, eight or ten feet into the ground. It survived all the storms including the 1900 storm. And I spent all my summers there or most of my summers. And I think that was conducive to my becoming a painter because I would go out in a little skiff. We always had a lot of people there in the summers, a huge table and a French cook from Louisiana who cooked these marvelous things and always a lot of guests from out of town and out of state would be at this big place in the summers. And I would slip out in the middle of dinner and go out just at dusk in a little rowboat. You could row almost across the channel which was about a mile over without getting above the waist [in water]. And it was just so great to sit out on the water with the waves slapping. Record players over on the other side of the lake, music drifting over to you. And sometimes I would be out there for an hour or two until the sun went completely down and sometimes the moonlight nights were just magnificent. . . .

Q: Sounds inspirational.

A: Oh, it was beautiful. That's where NASA is now, you know, at Clear Lake.

Q: Let's talk a bit about your early style. Where do you think your inspiration might have come from?

A: It was the sort of work that everybody was doing all over the world at that time. It was very abstract things, and I've always loved abstract paintings. When the Grumbacher man would come in town to sell his wares, Ben DuBose, who worked for Bute's, would call me to give a watercolor demonstration because he said I was painting like John Marin. Well, at that time I was a very young artist, and I don't think I really knew who John Marin was because he was so fresh and new in New York. But I suppose I was the first artist in Houston to do watercolor. Then when I was in San Miguel de Allende, I did

demonstrations for the watercolor classes so that I think I put out more than I took in in those watercolor lessons. But then the Grumbacher man gave me a big number 12 watercolor brush and that was very important in those days to have somebody give you a number 12 watercolor brush and some good colors.

Q: How do you account for the abstract quality of your painting?

A: Well, I think I always felt in design when I painted. In my earliest watercolors . . . and from the time I first started to paint, I had this feeling for design and then that was strengthened by my first teacher who had just come back from studying in Paris. I did a lot of city scenes at that time in watercolor, but they were still a little bit abstract even from my very early stage.

Q: When did you sell your first painting?

A: Oh now that's hard to say. My God, that's so many years ago I hardly remember! When my husband and I were first married, we lived on Crocker Street and there was a big storefront across the street from us on Pacific Street. And Buck and Ruby Lee Schiwetz and my husband and I took this place for our studio, and it had a lot of rooms upstairs. Then we rented to some other young artists, and there was just an artist group who worked at this big old storefront on Pacific. . . . I don't know if you know, but my husband is also a painter and he was in many of the early museum shows at that time, in city and state shows. We worked with Buck and Ruby Lee, and Buck did so much for all of the young artists. He had a station wagon, and James Chillman at the museum was so cooperative and so beautiful. Buck would round up all the paintings of the young artists in his old station wagon and take them over to the show maybe several hours late, and James would wait there and everybody would have their things in to be judged. So that was the time that I first started painting professionally. . . . I was very young at the time and I never really had painted for shows or been aware of shows actually and about that time I started selling my paintings. And the first gallery I showed at was Bute's, when Ben DuBose was running it.

Q: How does an artist make these contacts?

A: I don't remember how I happened to get the first invitation to the state shows. I've shown in the Texas Watercolor Show for years and in the last five years I guess I've won about six awards in that show. And then in the Texas Annual, I've won about five in the last five years. But I just get an announcement every year or an invitation to send to the show, and the Art League here in Houston has been very helpful in that they put out a bulletin every month. It gives a list of upcoming shows, and who the judges are going to be, and the deadline and all this sort of thing. Then after you make your mark, like I've been in the Midwest Biennial. After you're in the show once, you're automatically on the list and they send

you material for the next show that you might enter.

Q: And that's in Nebraska?

A: Yes, Midwest Biennial in Nebraska.

Q: You've exhibited outside of Texas as well?

A: Oh, yes, I have exhibited in Mexico, oh, various states. I've been on tours with the Texas Fine Arts. Now, you know it's a national show and the Texas Watercolor Show is open to anyone who has ever lived in Texas for as much as six months. And from those shows they select paintings to go on tour every year. And they'll go to maybe four or five states. Then they'll go to museums, to universities in other states.

Q: I'd like to talk to you for a moment about some of your major works. You won the First Purchase Award for the *Blueprint for Survival No. 2*. What was the theme of the *Blueprint for Survival* series of paintings?

A: Well, at that time I was very concerned about the war.

Q: This was in the late sixties?

A: Yes, I was very opposed to the war, and I marched in the marches, and I got shot up by the Ku Klux Klan. I don't know whether I should mention this. I shouldn't mention any group, I know. But I did march on the lawn of the army recruiting building with a lot of the young protestors and got rocks thrown at me out of trucks passing by. And we had quite a bit of harassment at the gallery at that time. One morning when my husband was leaving for the *Chronicle*, he came upstairs, woke me up and said, 'Come look quick. See what's happened to the front of the gallery.' There was a big hammer and sickle painted on the front of the gallery under the flowering tree and the mosaic fountain. Red paint just thrown all over the house, yellow paint against the building, all over the porch and down the walk and all over the back of the car. . . . Then the big thing was the night we were sound asleep and heard this terrible crash and ran downstairs, and somebody had shot through the front door and through the glass panels with a .45 I think. They lodged in the mosaic wall of the entry. We had to replace all the glass in the doors and replace the door itself which was one of those old glass doors in this old house that I grew up in. So that's what started my *Blueprint for Survival* series. The war and my being opposed to it and just what was happening in the world and the injustices and the fears, I think, that everyone was experiencing at that time. I had a son who was at the age when he would have gone into the service. . . . I had been playground director for a number of years and so many of my little kids from the playground whom I had worked with that were little dead-end kids, many whom I had grown to love very dearly, were killed during the war. And this was heartbreaking to me. And many of my friends' children that I had seen grow up. I was very despondent over the whole thing. So, I think all of this just sort of overflowed into this series that I did, the *Blueprint for*

During the Vietnam War, Margaret Webb Dreyer's gallery was vandalized by persons opposed to her antiwar activities.

Survival.

Q: Are the *Blueprint for Survival* paintings hopeful or not?

A: They are very hopeful. And I'm a very optimistic person. I suppose I did them sort of as a little prayer and [out of] a great desire to do something. All of this welled up in me when I was doing the Blueprint paintings. I'm very interested in people. It's heartbreaking for me to see any nationality subjected to indignity. I was a social worker. I taught at Ripley House — art and dance and I directed plays — and I taught at a park in the East End where a little Mexican boy used to walk through the park and some of the kids would throw rocks at him and say that he was not allowed in their park. But I think that after three years there I taught the children, or tried to make them see, that we are all alike.

Q: How many Blueprints were there?

A: I've done about fourteen all together, and then some other paintings have grown out of that style. I have always loved to paint with a lot of light emerging from a dark background. I love contrast and I love tension in painting. I love pull and tug. And so many of my paintings have very much contrast in them, of line and forms and color.

Q: Your series of paintings for survival, do you consider them distinct in their style and expression from what you'd done before or what you did after?

A: Well, I think probably in style my other works led into these because one series . . . has developed from the previous series. . . . I was winning awards in the *Post* Easter Show years ago and I have a very abstract painting that I think's dated about '40 or '38 when I was just starting to paint. It won first award in the *Post* Easter Show and it was called *Jesus Before Pilate* and it was very abstract. . . . But one series grew out of the one before and I think you could look, as I said, at my early things and realize they're my paintings but the thought changed. . . . So then out of the Blueprint series, I was influenced by African culture and I did this painting with a very dark blue background with the main lighting and the horse all very abstract. It was called *After the Benin*. And that was after the Benin culture, you know, in African art. . . . Now my new series is a series of almost nonobjective paintings, five-by-seven, on raw canvas. And they are stained paintings, but they are not stained paintings as in the Rothko things where they're just big blocks of color. These are design things with maybe three blocks in a painting with the movement crossing and still the same abstract forms that are used in my previous paintings, even in the Blueprint paintings, but not as much contrast I've noticed in these. They're softer, and they look more like old Persian rug colors.

Q: What was the inspiration for this new outgrowth?

A: I think I felt the need to paint bigger, larger things and I was

handicapped through the years because I always had some kind of business going, my murals company or teaching with the recreation department, painting classes all over the city. And then the gallery and pushing other people's work and just being a Sunday painter, having a small area to work in. So when I closed the gallery, I turned the master bedroom upstairs, which is a big long room, turned it into my studio. Martin's studio is way at the far end downstairs so we don't bother each other. And I had wall space to work on. So I just tacked these things to the ceiling and down to the floor, you know, and worked right on the wall. And I had never had room to do that before because we were living upstairs from the gallery. . . . I might have been influenced by my husband Martin bringing back a lot of batiks from Djakarta. Well, my paintings are nothing like these but they are similar in size to these things that reach from the floor to the ceiling. I used to do decorating, too, but don't study that very much now. The new trend, of course, is for the natural look — huge rocks, trees that touch the ceiling, and batik paintings, floor-to-ceiling batik paintings. Well, I didn't know this. I have always just painted as I felt. I think of people from various parts of the world who arrive at a similar expression. It's just amazing how the creative mind is a universal thing that the artist draws from. I've noticed this all through the years that I've painted. You will see something that comes out of Houston or New York or Timbuktu or anywhere, in the same style. It's just beautiful. And I've noticed color trends, too. During the war years there was a show — the Texas Annual that was held in Dallas every year — and that year all the paintings were red. Just practically everything in the show was red, and they were from all over Texas, artists who didn't know what [other] artists were doing. And I think this is true all over the world.

Q: Let me just go back for a moment and ask you what is your favorite painting or work which you have done? Do you have one that stands out in your mind as your best perhaps?

A: Well, most of my paintings I still like. A few of them I don't like that much but most of my paintings I've liked and I've kept several award paintings. I just have refused to sell them. I want to keep them for my son and to sort of see my progress from one period to another. But I love my *Blueprint for Survival* series, and I do like very much when I run across one of my old paintings that I did during my watercolor series. Sometimes I wonder how in the world I ever did them because my style is not really that way now, but I can still see the forms as similar. Although I would say my work is free, still fairly free, especially in this new series of long — well, they are almost like painted tapestries.

Q: Is there a particular painting that, for some reason, you most enjoyed?

A: Well . . . I was one of the first galleries to bring in pre-Columbian art.

Kathryn Swenson had, I guess, one of the first important galleries in Houston and she was representing Andre Emmerich of New York who specialized in pre-Columbian art. Kathryn's husband was a very fine architect here, Bailey Swenson. She and her husband and my husband and I all went to Mexico one summer and bought some pre-Columbian things. I was so excited about them when I brought them back, Andre was in town and I brought him over to see my pre-Columbian. And I had this painting up and it had been in a Houston show. It was called *Pink Tea*, and it was sort of a satire on gallery openings. In it all these huge paintings were hanging around this room and it had a big fancy French chandelier in the center and a long table with all the desserts and beautiful things they had at the openings. And the guests were talking and eating, and doing everything but looking at the art. So, Andre had been looking at the pre-Columbian and he saw the painting. And he was studying this painting of mine and Kathryn says, 'Come on, Andre, hurry up, we've got to go.' They were running late. Andre didn't pay any attention to her. He just kept looking at this painting and she was rushing him and he says, 'Kathy, leave me alone. I'm studying this crazy, wild painting.' So, at that time it was the only painting of mine I had in my house. A decorator from New Orleans had come about three or four weeks before and he bought everything I had in my house. Just cleaned me out. Old watercolors, practice things, little funny drawings, all Martin's things. We hardly had a watercolor in the house. So I think that was my chance to go to New York if I'd had something else to show Emmerich or if I'd followed through with it later.

Q: In your early career you did some murals, too, didn't you?

A: Yes, I did quite a few murals. In fact, I started a murals company. A friend of mine, Charlene Carpenter, who was an artist here, and I decided we would start a murals company, and we contacted about a dozen of the young leading artists in Houston at the time. We were doing murals in shops, in stores, in residences and about that time, I was contacted by Manlio Cavallini, who had moved to San Antonio and opened a mosaic company there, and had brought his Italian family and his Italian company to San Antonio. And he contacted me in Houston, and so we added mosaics to our murals business. We did some beautiful work for architects here.

Q: In Houston?

A: Yes, and outside of Houston, too, because mosaic was very new here. I did the Cavallini mosaic on the face of their building in San Antonio. I've done work for Wilson, Morris, Crain and Anderson. Now, they're split up and it's different firms. Mr. [Buford W.] Crain [Jr.] wanted us to present a mural for his new bank in Longview, Texas. He was leaving Houston and leaving the firm and retiring, I guess, to go back to

Longview, and he had a bank there so we did this mural. It was Mr. Crain's design, and I gave this job to Herb Mears to do. Herb had never worked in mosaic and he had done very little abstract work but he did a magnificent thing. I worked with him a little on how to do the mosaic, and then he went to San Antonio, worked with Cavallini. It's all done, you know, in reverse on paper and then set into this concrete foundation and then it's set in with wet cement. Then you let it dry and you have to wash it off with an acid, take the paper off. It was really a beautiful thing.

Q: Were most of these your designs?

A: No, this was one thing we decided to do. Let each artist do his own design and this was a very fine thing to do, I think. I was mainly the contact person, and then we would select the artist according to the style of architecture of the building or residence.

Q: That's very interesting. Did you have a registry of various artists? How did you go about doing this?

A: Well, I was familiar with their work, most of them, and each artist did several samples, small watercolors or case scenes of work, maybe a panel two-by-four, two-by-five, or one-by-three. Whether it worked for a residence or a building, or an old fashioned house or a little boutique or whatever, they would do different designs for different things. That went on until I opened the gallery. And even after the gallery was open, we still did mosaics a number of times.

Q: How does one go about organizing a gallery?

A: Well, to sum it up, my family home had been a rented house for years and we decided to do it over, such as enlarging it, walling up windows and installing ceiling lights. Just overnight Martin and I opened the gallery. And, of course, I ran it. He was a newspaperman, and I had all the time. That's when I started collecting pre-Columbian artifacts and then I specialized in pre-Columbian in the gallery. And then I went from pre-Columbian right into African sculpture. . . .

Q: Did you make contact among artists or did they come to you?

A: You just let a little something float in the air, and then you have all these people appearing at your door. I had done quite a few lecture things, once on a panel with two other artists at Rice University. . . . I met some of the young architectural students out there who later came to the gallery and wanted me to see their paintings and drawings and one of my first artists that I had in the gallery was Arthur Turner who has done beautiful things in the art world. He's now with Betty Moody's gallery. I took Arthur when he was a sophomore, I think, in college. . . . I've had Joseph Cain in my gallery who is a very fine artist from Corpus. People just come and ask you to look at their things and there was a man who came when I was away one day and left about a hundred paintings,

funny little things on paper. You know, I haven't heard from him since. I don't know what happened to him. I have these little stacks of funny little drawings. I've tried not to destroy anything, but other gallery people say if you've had something for two years, you need to throw it away or sell it. But I've tried to keep most things that artists have left at the gallery.

Q: Did you gear your gallery toward a particular clientele?

A: Not really. I geared my gallery to the artists. And I never made a lot of money in my gallery. But I had been helped so much by different people like Buck Schiwetz and Ben DuBose, those beautiful people, when I was young and just starting. I really never made a lot of money in my gallery because I had very young artists who weren't known. They would show with me for a year or two and about the time that their name would be built up, they'd go to another very prominent gallery here. They were subsidized by this gallery, and then they just started going right on up. But I have exposed a lot of young artists in Houston to the public, and I would have huge openings and the booze would flow and I'd even serve hors d'oeuvres, and the gallery opening would cost me three or four hundred dollars. I never had a contract with the artists, I never required anything of an artist. What he wanted to do was his business. I never tried to hold him back.

Q: Are informal arrangements common among most galleries?

A: Oh, I don't think so. I think most of them have a written agreement where the gallery might guarantee to sell a certain number [of paintings] during the year.

Q: I heard some people talking about the role of the middle-class galleries, where they cater more to the decorative tastes of people. Do you run across that type of gallery in Houston very much?

A: Galleries have just sprung up everywhere here. You can hardly go anywhere without seeing a gallery. We have some very beautiful galleries. I think maybe one or two of them have gone a little too far for Houston in bringing in just "idea" things that are a little beyond the concept of most people whether it would be here or New York or wherever. But, there are these things like the Westheimer Art Show where they have booths lined for blocks and blocks, and any amateur artist can go over and put his things up in a booth. It's a little bit unfortunate that they aren't juried by someone. People who don't know art, who grew up without any knowledge of it, are apt to buy these things because they think they have a bargain and end up with a bunch of junk in their home. And more power, you know, to the young artists to be able to sell their things like that on the street. I'm not putting the whole group down because among those artists there are some talented people who will show in galleries some day and become very great

artists. There are commerical galleries who cater only, as you say, to the decorator-type business. But the better decorators wouldn't touch some of those things because they know what's good too. I've always tried to keep good work in my gallery, and good work is not always the first to sell. Most of my people in the gallery were young artists but they were artists that I recognized as having a lot of talent and a big future. And most of them have gone on to become very fine artists.

Q: When you first began painting professionally, what was the climate in Houston and the surrounding area toward art and artists?

A: Well, your friends, all your friends, wanted you to give them a painting. I still had some distant family. When they came through town, [they'd say,] 'Oh, I love this painting. Why don't you give me this?' Even if you'd go for certain services some place and you're paying for the service this person would say, 'I want one of your paintings. Why don't you give me this one?' Well, you know, you can't say this little watercolor sells for six hundred dollars. You don't give away your service. You wouldn't give away six hundred dollars worth of service, and yet somehow people think that artists should give them paintings. Now there is the beautiful thing that exists among artists themselves, they exchange paintings. And this is fine. You can also exchange — like I have a marvelous old chest that I got in a trade with Philip Chan. He has a wonderful Chinese antique gallery, and he deals mostly in oriental things but he had this chest in his shop that I loved. He saw a large painting of mine that was an abstract painting of fish. And, of course, that's a very beautiful symbol with the Chinese. He loved that painting and said it was the first abstract painting he'd ever seen that he liked. I had been looking at this chest, so he said, 'I want that painting, you want the chest, why don't we trade?'

Q: When you first began painting and selling your paintings in Houston, was it profitable? Has it changed over the years.?

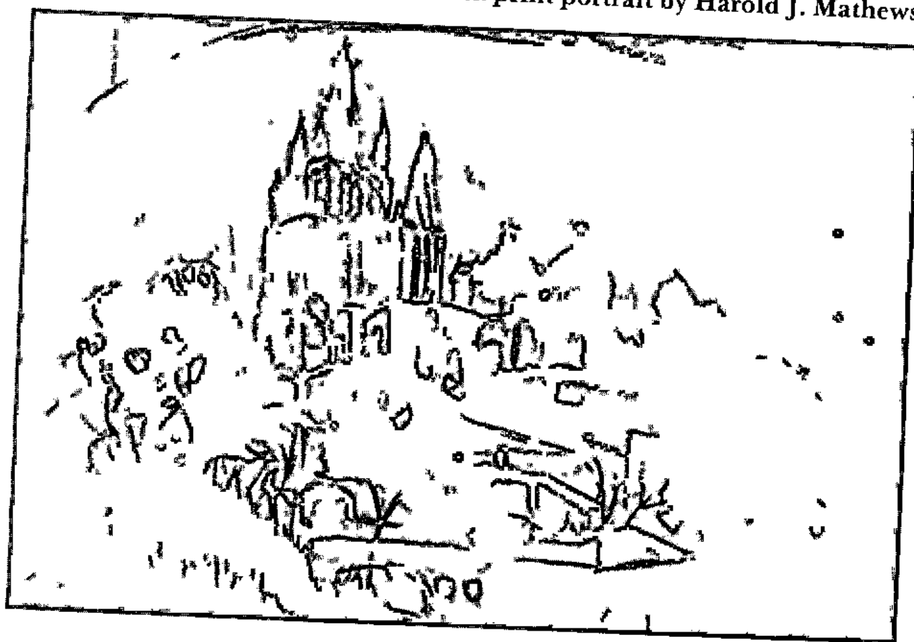
A: Paintings in those days sold for very little. Well, Polly Marsters had a gallery here. There were Ben DuBose and a few others who handled the top Houston artists at that time. When Kathryn Swenson opened her gallery, she took them. With the gallery pushing your work, you're much more apt to sell because they get a big build up and they're covered by the critics. Houston was a small town sort of but there was always that group of people who love creative things, who love fine arts, who went to the museums. We had the Contemporary Arts Museum out on the grounds of the Prudential Building for a while before they built the new building, and we had the Art League and all those people would sponsor shows. I at that time was depending a lot on awards that I won in shows. Some artists say, 'I never enter a show, I'm just not interested in shows.' But a lot of top artists enter shows and win awards. And you have a good

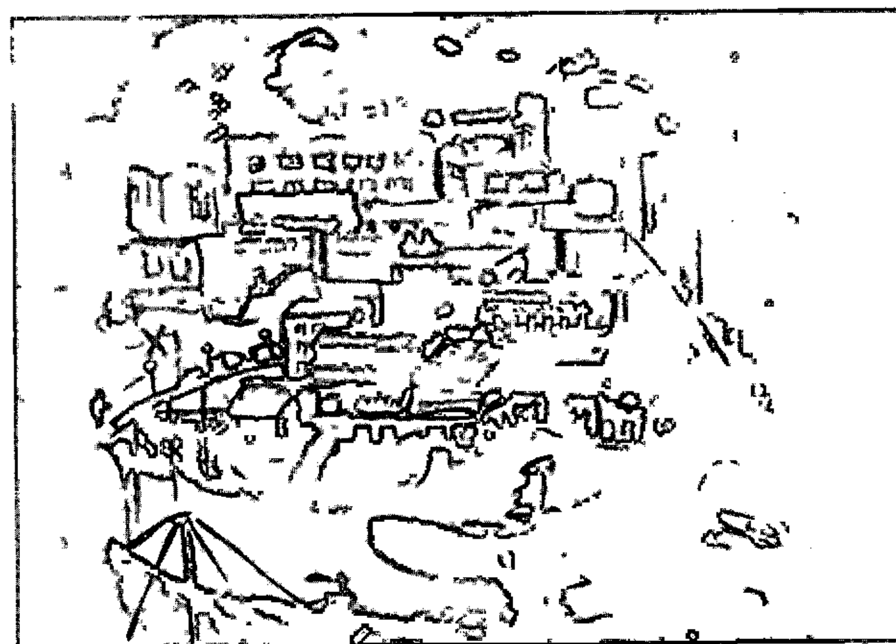
income if you enter enough shows and win enough awards. But prices have changed and attitudes have changed and people are becoming more aware, I think, of fine arts all over the world. . . .

Q: Are there some outlets or opportunities for artists now?

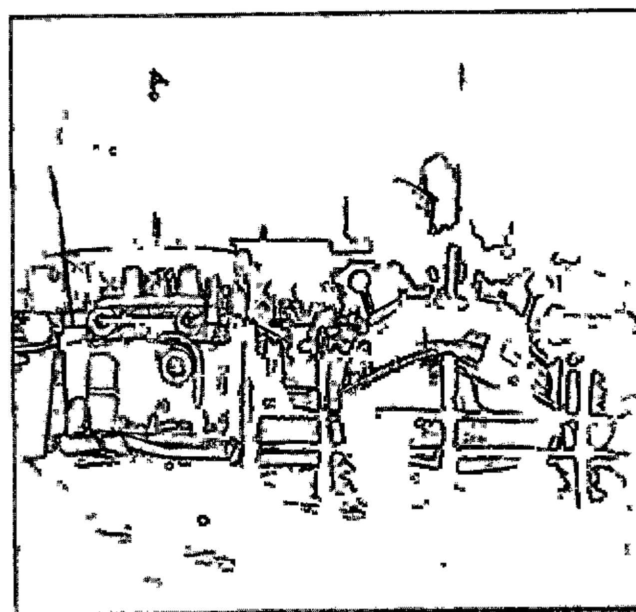
A: I think there's a lot of people who deserve much credit for pushing the arts in Houston. I think Jim Harithas of the Contemporary Arts Museum has done a fantastic thing for Houston and Texas artists. He reminds me, though he is a completely different type of person, of James Chillman when he was at the Museum of Fine Arts. Chillman was so warm and so receptive and made the artists feel that this was their museum. And Jim Harithas is the same way. I think Mr. [William] Agee at the art museum is doing a fine thing there and we have the Art League and the art council and the Main Street happening thing. We have many things coming into Houston that we haven't had before, like the outdoor sculpture show. The sculptures are just marvelous and people are considering buying them and also paintings for public areas. It's very important that people should have these things before them. When you go to Europe, you realize what a dearth of art there is around us in most parts of the United States. In Houston we've always had a lot of magnificent things in museums and private collections, but now people are getting these things out of the homes and into shows in various places. . . . There's so many people I could mention, such as the de Menils who did a fabulous thing for Houston. I think that Houston has a great future in the arts and I certainly will help in any way as long as I live.

Invitation for the posthumous exhibition of Margaret Dreyer's paintings at the University of St. Thomas. Block print portrait by Harold J. Mathews.





Watercolor scene of downtown Houston.



Pink Tea, 1949.

An example from the *Blueprint for Survival* series.