

## 2020 Docent Study Groups Unveiling American Genius Section 2: People

**Report by Jean Grossman**

**Victoria Marshall Littna (1921-1991), *Thoughtful Woman*, (1951), oil on canvas 36 1/4 x 29 1/2 in.**

*Thoughtful Woman* is an oil on canvas portrait painted by Victoria Littna circa 1951. This portrait reflects the German Expressionist school of painting which Littna claimed influenced her. She rejected representational colors, wishing to express emotion through the colors she chooses. In *Thoughtful Woman*, bold areas of color define the figure set against a simple, uncluttered background. The influence of Fauvism is evident in the choice of her colors to convey the subject's inner feelings and to convey Littna's own emotions about the subject. The placement of complementary colors leads the viewer's eye on tangents: the green hair to the red hand; the blue chair to the orange skin. The woman's face is a shocking acid yellow that jumps out from surrounding deep, muted colors and, perhaps, indicates a physical or emotional state that is more disquieting than one of thoughtful repose. Yellow is not always a sunny color. In 18th Century Russia, insane asylums were referred to as "yellow houses." In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Viola describes a young lovelorn woman as, "...pined in thought, and with a...yellow melancholy, she sat like patience on a monument...." The color yellow also references fading away with sickness or age. Does the yellow face of Littna's *Thoughtful Woman* reflect any of these states of physical or emotional being? In profile, she looks into the distance. Her features aren't defined except for the downward turn of her lips and the soulful gaze of her eye. Perhaps the color indicates that she is ill. She could be reflecting on her loss of youth, contemplating her own mortality. Littna brilliantly leaves this portrait open to any interpretation a viewer brings to it.



Victoria Marshall Littna was born in Argentina to British parents. She and her family moved to England right before the 1944 German blitz on London. It was there she met and married Francis Littna, who was a Czech political refugee. They lived in England where her husband taught art at Morley College at the University of London. From there she and her husband moved to France, and in 1965, they immigrated to the United States, where they made their home, and Francis Littna taught art at WMU. In Kalamazoo, Victoria became involved in the arts community and with the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts. In a 1985 article about her in the *Kalamazoo News*, Victoria Littna stated, "My paintings stem from the German Expressionist school of painting. That is, I do not necessarily follow representational colors, but rather to express emotion by the colors I use. I rely on my subjective intuition that it might inspire an alternate outlook to my audience." The article further notes, "...she was called "a psychological portrait painter," and believes her best works are apparent when she disappears, establishing complete empathy with her subject." In the spirit of the German Expressionists, this portrait does indeed seem fueled by emotion and inspired by the subconscious. With this in mind, it makes *Thoughtful Woman* all the more poignant.

On researching Victoria Littna, the most common thread I found was “a painter and the wife of artist, Francis Littna.” Very few images of her work can be found on the internet. Of those images, the majority are watercolors of landscapes and cityscapes done in a Fauve, Expressionist style. Three of her works are in the KIA collection. These are all oil on canvas paintings. Two are portraits, *Thoughtful Woman* and *Ben Tibbs in Scots Tie*; the third is a cityscape, *Gibson’s Music Store*. At Kalamazoo College there is a record of a couple of watercolor landscapes and a portrait she painted of Nelda Balch, former Chair of the Kalamazoo College Theatre Department. Interestingly, her main body of works that are accessed on the internet are softly rendered watercolors, very different from her deeper, more dramatic oil paintings.

Ideas for tours (using works from the KIA permanent collection) 1. How is the color yellow used to draw attention to a specific area of a painting? Does it elicit a specific response? Does it emphasize an object in the painting? Does the use of yellow help establish a mood? Paintings that could be used to explore this are: *Lady with Quilt* by Kathryn Albin Hodgman; *Portrait of Mrs. Gilmore* by Nora Drapce; *Ella* by Lily Harmon. 2. How does an artist engage the viewer’s interest in a portrait when the subject is sitting passively in a chair, not involved in an activity or in conversation. What tells a story and gains your attention; the surroundings, the objects included, the attitude of the subject, the use of color, composition and brush technique, etc.? Paintings that could be used to explore this are: *The Chintz Chair* by Oliver Chaffee; *Seated Girl* by Richard Wilt; *Anne Frank with Diary* by Morris Broderson. 3. *Portrait of Mrs. Gilmore* by Nora Drapce is similar to *Thoughtful Woman* in style and color palette. Compare the similarities and differences in the way that each artist depicted her subject. What story does each seem to tell?

References: “Empathy With Her Subject.” Kalamazoo News, December 6-12, 1985. Morton, Jill. “Color Symbolism.” Color Matters.com. <https://www.colormatters.com/color-symbolism> (accessed May 12, 2020) Online fine art auction and gallery sites featuring watercolors by Victoria Marshall Littna for sale.

## Report by Jim Carter

### Object 1: Hung Liu, *Lady Lotus*, 2016, mixed media on panel

It is the late Qing Dynasty, China, a young bride is suddenly widowed. She has already moved into her husband's home and is essentially the property of her husband's family. She is seen as a burden to her in-laws as she can no longer fulfill her primary obligation of producing a male heir. In addition, during this 19th century vignette, there are famines, wars, and pestilences in China that have claimed nearly one hundred million lives. Her husband's family is desperate for money to survive. In addition to her beauty, she is educated, talented, graceful, and charming. At the courts of the Emperor or a home of a nobleman she will fetch a high price as a courtesan or concubine. So, she is sold to the highest bidder.

As an elegant, talented, yet "forbidden" woman, now called *mingji*, her skills in music, poetry, painting and calligraphy will be cultivated. She will survive as long as her charm, beauty and talent will allow. Unfortunately, she, like most of her contemporaries, faces a tragic end as her



smile becomes wrinkled and patrons lose interest. As a "*mingji*", the best she can hope for would be to become a Buddhist nun once her special attributes were no longer desired. Most likely, she will end her earthly existence on the streets, in a cheap brothel or by taking her own life.

### ***Lady Lotus: mixed media on panel***

This portrait begins as an enlarged black and white photograph to which the artist adds oil base paint. This photograph most likely represents a courtesan, concubine or prostitute whose story could easily mirror the above 19th century Chinese vignette. Four years after immigrating to the United States, Hung Liu is able to return to China. During this trip, in an old shop, she discovers a large cache of 19th century historical photographs of women (many of whom were prostitutes or concubines), children, refugees and soldiers. These anonymous images become the backbone and inspiration of her work for the next four decades. She is primarily focused on the condition of women and children under male-dominated regimes. Her portraits present visions of beauty, dignity, strength and heroism in the face of persecution and abuse.

Trained as a master artist in social realism in China, Hung Liu combines vibrant color combinations, broad abstract expressionist brushstrokes, symbolic floating circles (Japanese *enso*), bands of solid pigment, blurring outlines and her characteristic "drips" made by pouring linseed oil on the painted surface to produce a stunning image of an unknown woman previously marginalized in Chinese society.

*Lady Lotus* is dressed in a colorful kimono. Her elaborate headdress would suggest a position in the royal court or in the home of a very wealthy man. She holds a lotus flower in a diagonal across her body. However, the flower has lost some of its color and many petals. While facing us, her eyes are diverted. Hung Liu states, "In China we say that the eyes are a window to the soul. I paint the eyes of my subjects differently, as their souls are different." The background is a traditional Chinese landscape with mountains, streams, houses and distal atmospheric rendering of mountains.

Symbolism is very important in Hung Liu's work. She states that her drip laden style, poetically referred to as "weeping realism," has both a unifying and dissolving effect on the painted image. The technique is meant to "give a feel of distant memory" as if memory is fading away. In Liu's words, "circles are a kind of Buddhist abstraction." In Zen Buddhism, the circle alludes to emptiness, wholeness or the cycle of natural phenomenon. Colloquially, circles reference immortality or infinity. In Chinese culture, red symbolizes luck, joy, happiness, vitality and fertility. It is the traditional color worn by Chinese brides. The lotus flower is a symbol of beauty, enlightenment, happiness, harmony and peace.

### **Hung Liu: Artist**

Hung Liu was born in northeastern China in 1948, two years after the start of the Chinese Communist Revolution. Her father, an officer in the Nationalist army, was arrested when the family crossed into the Communist territory looking for food. She would not see him again until 1994. Following his arrest and imprisonment, her mother destroyed all family photos featuring

her father to protect her daughter from Communist retribution. Photos subsequently took on a special meaning for Hung Liu. At age eleven, she and her mother fled to Beijing because of by Mao Zedong's "Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution," which essentially devastated China's economy and led to widespread famine. At age twenty, despite obvious artistic talent and a keen intellect, Hung Liu was forced to spend four arduous years receiving her "proletariat re-education" as a farm laborer in the Chinese countryside, toiling 364 days per year. Creative activities were strongly discouraged although she continued to surreptitiously sketch fellow workers. A friend smuggled a camera into the farm and secretly gave it to Hung Liu. Her fascination with photography grew as she captured images of the people in the camp and village. With her sketches and photos, she was able to visually capture the struggle, but also the strength, courage and resilience in her subjects.

After four years of hard physical labor she had completed her "re-education." Universities in China were beginning to reopen and she was able to attend art school at the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing where she was trained as a social realist. As such, she was required to paint Mao Zedong in the most idealized, heroic, manner with rosy cheeks, large physical stature and smiling peasants surrounding him.

Several years after Mao's death in 1976, Hung Liu was accepted into the graduate program at the University of California, San Diego. However, it took the Communist party over four years to grant her a passport. Leaving her son and mother in China, at age 36 she arrived in the US in 1984 with two suitcases and twenty dollars. Within a few years of being able to express her creativity without political constraints, she was recognized as a world class artist. Her early life under a totalitarian government clearly influenced her art. Yet despite this emotional trauma and struggle, the sensitivity of her paintings is remarkable. "I communicate with the characters in my paintings, prostitutes, these completely subjugated people; with reverence, sympathy and awe." She is currently Professor Emerita at Mills College; Oakland, California.

### **Questions for docent tour:**

Imagine the eyes staring directly at you. How would this change the painting? Think of other examples.

Look at the lotus flower. What do you think the artist is trying to say?

Backgrounds are important. What does this background mean to you? Think of other backgrounds?

For Hung Liu, drips on the painting are very important. What do the drips mean to you?

Symbols are also important to Hung Liu. What symbols do you see? What do they mean to you? Would you add any other symbols of your own choosing to this painting?

## Report by Julie Jursinic

### Object 1: Phillip Leslie Hale. *Art Students*, Oil on canvas laid down on panel, 1913.

Hale's piece *Art Students* represents the style of his work done in his later years. From left to right the sitters are: Alfred Truman, Robert Logan, Ralph McLellan and Jerry Dawnes (information about these people are at the end of this report). Hale was very interested in Johannes Vermeer at the time he painted "Art Students" and Vermeer's style comes through in this work - an intimate interior scene of middle-class life, with luminosity of color, attention to detail and treatment and use of light. Warm, dark earth tones are predominant, with highlights of yellow fruit and red tie. There are striking highlights, as if light is coming in through a window, shining on the meticulous still life-like variety of bottles and glasses, and on the faces.



There is a mysterious object on the table that the figure on the left is holding – potentially a lion/dog-type animal with wide open mouth. This object reflects Hale's interest in Symbolism, perhaps this object could represent a Chinese Imperial guardian lion, symbolizing protection, but in any case, it clearly has a meaning important to Hale. Symbolism was a late nineteenth-century art movement of French, Russian and Belgian origin, related to the gothic component of Romanticism and Impressionism. The symbolist painters used mythological and dream imagery. The symbols used by symbolism are not the familiar emblems of mainstream iconography but intensely personal, private, obscure and ambiguous references.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symbolism\\_\(arts\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symbolism_(arts)). Hale knows his subjects and shows them in a casual setting with an expressive quality. Perhaps we could interpret the figure on the left to be a new arriver to the bar, still in his hat and coat, intruding on the group of three intimate friends on the right. The close pose of the 3 supports their friendship, with the separation of the person on the left somehow setting him apart. Or perhaps the person on the left could also be one of the group of friends, just arriving with the object, to join them enjoying the evening.

### Artist Background

Hale was born into an old and distinguished family in Boston in 1865 and was related to Nathan Hale and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Both his aunt, Susan Hale, and his older sister, Ellen Day Hale, were painters who encouraged his artistic interests. Hale was allowed to study art only after he had passed the Harvard University entrance examination. He studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in 1883 under Edmund Tarbell, and with Kenyon Cox and J. Alden Weir at the Art Students League of New York.



*Woman in Garden*, 1895

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip\\_Leslie\\_Hale](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Leslie_Hale)

Hale traveled to Paris in 1887 and enrolled in the academic programs at the private Académie Julian and the official Ecole des Beaux-Arts; in Paris he also began his career as a writer on art. He studied in Paris for five years and traveled throughout

Europe. During the summers Hale painted at Giverny, with his friend Theodore Butler, Monet's son-in-law, where he was influenced by the palette and brushwork of Claude Monet. "Under the influence of Monet, he adopted the bright light and broken brushwork of Impressionism but eventually developed an individual interpretation in his delicate, ethereal paintings in which figures virtually dissolve in an aura of light. The touch of mystery in Hale's Giverny images suggests the impact of the Symbolist movement, in which ordinary objects are invested with powerful symbolic overtones, and the related technical experiments of the so-called Neo-Impressionist Georges Seurat, who used tiny contrasting strokes of color to create an effect at once shimmering and strangely static." [https://www.wga.hu/bio\\_m/h/hale/biograph.html](https://www.wga.hu/bio_m/h/hale/biograph.html)

(Monet arrived in Giverny in 1883 looking for a quiet rural village which would offer him a variety of landscape subjects to paint. The first artists to follow Monet's arrived around 1885 but he complained about the large number of artists that began to arrive in Giverny. During the 43 years that Monet lived in Giverny, more than three hundred and fifty other artists came to this area to paint. <https://www.theartistsroad.net/articles/artistsofgiverny>)

Hale exhibited his work in Boston (at the Art Club), Philadelphia (Pennsylvania Academy), New York (Society of American Artists, National Academy of Design), and Chicago (Art Institute) and settled in 1893 in Boston. He became an instructor of antique drawing at the Museum School in 1893 and began a demanding exhibition schedule that he would maintain throughout his career. In the 1890s he painted his most experimental works, which showed an interest in Neo-impressionism and Symbolism.



*The Rose Tree Girl. 1922.*

Hale married fellow artist Lilian Westcott Hale in 1902, and he also taught at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. One of the leaders of the Boston School, Hale was an influential art teacher, writer and critic, for the Boston Herald from 1905 to 1909, and for the Boston Evening Transcript.

He wrote the first American book about Johannes Vermeer in 1913 and adopted, and advocated for, Vermeer's style. This style specialized in intimate interior scenes of middle-class life, luminosity of color, meticulous attention to detail and masterly treatment and use of light. This was the same year that he painted *Art Students*, which reflects his striving for this style.

Hale also painted allegorical scenes of idealized female figures. In his last works, however, he returned somewhat to a more traditionally impressionist manner in garden scenes.

[https://collection.terraamericanart.org/view/people/asitem/items\\$0040null:228/0](https://collection.terraamericanart.org/view/people/asitem/items$0040null:228/0) Hale served on the jury of the Panama-Pacific Exposition in 1915, and he remained an active figure on the Boston art scene throughout the 1920s. His reputation would come to rest more upon his merits as a teacher than upon his own painting although he won many prizes and awards and continued to exhibit his works nationwide. Philip Leslie Hale died suddenly in 1931 at the age of sixty-six. <https://childsgallery.com/artist/philip-leslie-hale/>

Information about subjects in *Art Students* painting:

Alfred Truman and Jerry Dawnes – no information available.

ROBERT FULTON LOGAN (1889 - 1959). Born near Lauder, Manitoba, portrait painter and etcher Robert Fulton Logan studied art in Paris at age 16, followed by studies at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Art Institute of Chicago. For twenty years, he was a faculty member at Connecticut College, retiring in 1954. In his later years, Logan headed the Art Department at Newton College of the Sacred Heart. His work was widely exhibited in major galleries and museums in both Europe and the United States, including the Corcoran Gallery, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and the Paris Salon (1921 – 1930). He died at Boston, Massachusetts. <https://brierhillgallery.com/robert-fulton-logan>

RALPH D. MCLELLAN (American, 1884-1977). Ralph McLellan, a native of San Marcos Texas, studied with Edmund Tarbell, José Arpa y Parea and Phillip Leslie Hale, at the Art Students League of New York, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Later in his career, he taught at the Pennsylvania Museum of Fine Arts, the Philadelphia School of Industrial Arts, and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. portraits and more traditional paintings. Best known for his Realism, Representation, Naturalism, and Traditional styles, subjects were typically Portraits, Floral Landscape, Wildflowers, Landscape, Nature Scenes.

<https://fineart.ha.com/itm/paintings/property-from-the-descendents-of-the-artistralph-d-mclellan-american-1884-1977-farmer-in-fieldoil-on/a/5006-67277.s>

[https://www.askart.com/artist\\_keywords/Ralph\\_D\\_McLellan/20413/Ralph\\_D\\_McLellan.aspx](https://www.askart.com/artist_keywords/Ralph_D_McLellan/20413/Ralph_D_McLellan.aspx)

## Report by Susan Baker

Tylonn Sawyer, *American Woman: Columbia*, oil on canvas, 2018

### OVERVIEW

The KIA purchased this artwork in 2019 (Claire Lahti Fund Purchase) and included it in the *Resilience: African American Artists as Agents of Change* Exhibition in the Fall of 2019. It is oil on canvas, painted in 2018. The KIA described the painting as a “heady visualization of the fierce determination to inspire a new promise of liberty in America.” It can also be viewed as an attempt to “change the narrative” of Black artists and their work.



There are two “living people” associated with this painting:

The Artist: Tylonn J. Sawyer

The Subject: Scheherazade Washington Parrish

### THE ARTIST

Tylonn J. Sawyer, born in 1976, is an American figurative artist, teacher, mentor and activist living in Detroit. His work centers on themes of American politics, race, history and pop culture. He earned an MFA in Painting from New York Academy of Art and a BFA in Drawing and

Painting from Eastern Michigan University. In 2019, he was awarded the Alain Locke Recognition Award as well as a Kresge Fellowship for Visual Art. He is also the recipient of the Peter T. Rippon Travel Award, independent study at the Royal Academy of Art, London, England. Sawyer now teaches art at Oakland Community College, where he inspires others to use their imagination and personalize their experiences through art.

His drawings and paintings have been included in solo and group exhibitions throughout the United States and abroad, including the International Venice Biennale, Italy; Texas A&M University, The New York Academy of Art, and The Museum of Contemporary Art, The Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History and The Detroit Institute of Arts, all located in Detroit, Michigan; Heron Arts, San Francisco, CA; Kravets/Wehby Gallery, Rush Arts & The New York Academy of Art, all located in New York City, New York.

Sawyer himself explains that his work “mines symbols of power and oppression from the historical strata of western art, exposing some truths while covering others to gain a clearer picture of concepts that have shaped our contemporary society.” This painting is perhaps a commentary on the diversity of the black experience in America and an attempt to change and dispel our stereotypes. He is a member of the Vanguard Artist Collective, a small group of like-minded artists located in Detroit. There is friendly competition among the artists, who each push each other to become better people and artists.

“Maybe what is most compelling is Sawyer’s clear commitment not only to his practice as a visual artist, but to his role as a mentor and a teacher,” said Amanda Krugliak, Curator at the Institute for the Humanities. “His engagement with young people in Detroit—his long-standing role as an educator there—sets him apart as an artist. He is an activist, rooted and invested, directly impacting his community’s present and future.” He is also the founder and ongoing mentor of the Teen Council at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Detroit. Its mission is to actively engage young people in the life of the museum and to introduce them to the dynamics of a life of dialogue, engagement and activism.

## **THE SUBJECT**

The woman in the painting is Scheherazade Washington Parrish, a writer known to many in the Detroit creative community as the goddess Columbia. She is also known as Sawyer’s “muse” and figure model. She is a well-known and recognizable figure in the Detroit creative community, but here she is shown portraying Columbia.

## **WHO IS COLUMBIA**

Columbia is the goddess of liberty, a feminized version of Uncle Sam and the personification of America. She was typically portrayed as a serene and beautiful white woman, making Sawyer’s version much more “modern, confrontational and powerful.” The name “Columbia” was derived from the explorer Christopher Columbus. There are many examples of this popular name in our country, including the fact that our nation’s capital is located in the District of Columbia. “Hail Columbia” was even the unofficial national anthem until 1931, when the Star-Spangled Banner became the official anthem.

## WHY THE BASEBALL BAT

Perhaps it references Moses Walker, Toni Stone and Jackie Robinson, who used sport as an equalizer and broke color barriers in multiple areas. Or is it perhaps a reference to “wielding a bat” as an act of violence? It is a Louisville Slugger, slung across her shoulder. Her expression seems to suggest, “Try me.”

## SOURCE LIST

U-M News, October 14, 2019

<https://www.freep.com/story/entertainment/arts/2019/10/12/rashaun-rucker-sydney-james-tylonn-sawyer-detroit-vanguard-artist-collective/3942984002/>

<https://essayd.org/?p=583>

## Report by Amy Hudson

Mary Abbott, *Portrait of Elaine DeKooning*, 1948, oil on canvas



Mary Abbott was a member of the first generation of the American Abstract Expressionists. Despite the professional obstacles facing female artists during this pre-feminist era, Abbott earned critical and public success by exhibiting at prominent New York galleries, including Samuel Kootz, Tanager, Tibor de Nagy, and the Stable. Though Abbott was able to find success as an artist, she, like other women, was left out of the historical narrative of this male-dominated movement. Only recently, are women being recognized for their contributions to the Abstract Expressionist Movement. Abbott was one of the artists included in “Women of Abstract Expressionism,” the first museum exhibition ever

dedicated exclusively to women of the Abstract Expressionist movement. Curated by Gwen Chanzit and presented at the Denver Museum of Art in 2016, the show also included the work of Jay DeFeo, Helen Frankenthaler, Sonia Gechtoff, Judith Godwin, Grace Hartigan, Elaine de Kooning, Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell, Deborah Remington, and Ethel Schwabacher.

Mary Abbott was born in New York City in 1921 and raised on Manhattan’s Upper East Side. Her family lineage traces back to John Adams, the second president of the United States. Her mother, Elizabeth Grinnell was a poet and syndicated columnist with Hearst. Her aunt was Mary Ogden Abbott, was a sculptor. Her father, Henry, worked at the State Department and her cousin was secretary of the navy. Mary’s childhood was a privileged one. She attended the Chapin School, an all-girls, private school located in New York City’s Upper East Side. When she was 17, Abbott studied at the Art Students League in New York and was able to work with artists such as George Grosz. She went on to attend the Corcoran Museum School (now known as Corcoran School of the Arts and Design) in Washington DC. In 1941, she came out as a debutante at the Colony Club. She also had a brief career as a model and appeared on the covers of *Vogue*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Charm*, and *Glamour*.

Abbot married painter Lewis Teague in 1943. They worked together exploring cubism during their three-year marriage in California. When the marriage ended Abbott drove herself back to

New York in a convertible with a dog she picked up in Denver. Upon returning to New York, she rented a cold water flat on Tenth St. in Manhattan. Her location gave her access to an inner circle of artists. She joined the "Downtown Group", which consisted of a group of artists who lived in lower Manhattan. Sculptor, David Hare, introduced her to Willem de Kooning whose studio was close by. Abbott eventually became romantically involved with de Kooning and they remained close until his death. She enrolled in an experimental school called The Subject of the Artist where she was able to work with founding members, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, William Baziotas, and David Hare. Philip Pavia invited her to join "The Artist's Club" where she was one of only a few women in the group including Elaine de Kooning and Perle Fine. Abbott frequently visited the Cedar Street Tavern, which was known as a meeting place for Abstract Expressionists.

In 1949, Abbott met businessman Tom Clyde. They were both in the U.S. Virgin Islands finalizing their respective divorces. They married in 1950. Clyde's poor health led them to spend the winters in Haiti and St. Croix, where Abbott produced many beautiful and inventive abstract works. The marriage ended in divorce in 1966. In 1970, Abbott accepted a visiting professorship at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis and ended up staying for nearly a decade. She eventually returned to New York and purchased a small home in Southampton and a loft in the SoHo neighborhood of Manhattan.

When Abbott was 9 years old, she became ill with an infection behind her ear which was complicated by pneumonia and was bedridden for two years. She recalls her childhood as one spent outdoors in nature. "As a child, I had been with everything-animals, plants. I didn't see beauty; I was in it, I was part of it". Her illness forced her to redefine her relationship with nature and art. "One morning I woke up and looked out the window, at two pine trees that been named after my brother and I when we were born, Billy and Mary. I realized I wasn't with beauty and nature anymore; I was seeing it from the outside. So, for the rest of my life I'd paint to get with it again."

When Abbott discovered Abstract Expressionism she said it just hit her. She really liked it. She said trying to do things representationally didn't work for her. Abstract expressionism allowed her to talk. She couldn't talk in a representational way. She used bold colors and gestural brushstrokes "to draw the imagination". Abbott's vivid oil paintings were inspired by nature and her travels. "I like the process of paintings. The intensity of living nature through myself--using the medium, paint color, and line defining the poetry of living space; that is my aim, life and work," she said. While wintering in St. Croix and Haiti, she found inspiration for her work exploring the jungles, markets, and abandoned plantations. Her work is more about the experience of these places rather than the depiction of them.

#### *Portrait of Elaine de Kooning, 1948*

Elaine sits in a chair holding a cat and what appears to be a book. The background is nondescript; it's made up of blocks of color. Elaine is the focus of the work. She makes direct eye contact with the viewer and almost seems to have a hint of a smile. This direct gaze is what draws my attention first. The blue v-shape at her collar brings my attention down to the cat and then book in her lap. On the white pages of the book, I notice her green hand and my gaze

follows along the angle of her forearm and then upper arm, noticing the colorful background on the right side of the work. The angle of her upper arm brings me to the back of the chair and them back to Elaine's face. On the left side of her face is a vertical swath of yellow that brings my gaze down the left side of the painting. Abbott used a lot of greens and browns along with blues, yellows, black, and white. The portrait appears to have cubist influence.

Elaine de Kooning was also an abstract expressionist as well as an art critic. Once Mary found her way to "art scene" in New York, Elaine took her under her wing. Mary also met Elaine's husband Willem, "Bill", de Kooning and eventually the two became romantically involved. It was an on again off again affair that continued for years. Elaine and Bill had an open marriage and Elaine was well aware of the affair he had with Mary. She very much approved of it, in fact. She told Mary that sometimes she wished Bill had married her.

#### Questions for A Tour

What do you notice about the subject's gaze? How does that make you feel?

Based on what you see, what can you tell me about the subject?

What do you think the subject is thinking?

What colors do you notice? How do they make you feel?

#### Bibliography

\*Disclaimer: This paper was written during the Covid 19 pandemic. The only access I had to resources was through the internet. Unfortunately, there were not a lot of resources for Mary Abbott other than obituaries.

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**Report by Emily P. Hoffman**

**Oliver Newberry Chaffee, *The Chintz Chair*, 1930, oil on canvas**

Mr. Oliver Chaffee was born in Detroit in 1881 and lived until 1944. He was a modern American artist. He was married twice, each time to an artist. His second wife, born in Kalamazoo, was Ada Gilmore Chaffee, a watercolorist, which probably explains the painting I am reviewing, *The Chintz Chair* was donated to the KIA by Mr. and Mrs. Donald S. Gilmore. It is possible and likely that the woman in the painting is Ada Gilmore Chaffee. She was a better-known artist than Mr. Chaffee. Ada and Oliver met at the Art Institute of Chicago, and again in Paris. They moved to Provincetown, Massachusetts which was the oldest art colony in the U.S. He studied at the Detroit Fine Arts Academy, the New York School of Art, and the Art Students League of New York. Then he went to Provincetown to study under Charles W. Hawthorne. Then he went to Paris where he was influenced by the Fauves. He was included in the New York Armory Show of 1913. He travelled between Provincetown and France.



*The Chintz Chair* shows a woman with a suntan with light brown skin. There is more emphasis on the chair than on the woman. There is a limited palette of colors: brown, red, white, and blue. The woman is fairly flat. The chair has colorful and interesting red and blue flowers. There is a white highlight on the chair which matches the white blouse the woman is wearing. There is a throw (small blanket) on the chair and the woman's arm with red, which matches the flowers on the chair. There is a cubist pattern at the top of the painting. His style is modern and somewhat abstract.

References: Solveiga Rush, "Chaffee scholar offers talk at PAAM Saturday", *The Cape Codder*, Nov. 18, 2005, p. 50.