The Artful Memory of Mary Shaw
By Megan Shay

It is a warm, early spring morning on a wildly sloping porch in Oakland. Mary Shaw Maronek Horn, a tall, stately woman with a long mane of white, white hair loosely coiled and tucked about her head like some prim cap askew, is recanting stories of her younger years.

Her grandparents owned most of Squirrel Hill when it was still farmland — they sold what is now Frick Park to the Fricks — and built a graceful mansion on Shaw Avenue, in which Mary spent much of her childhood. Mary Shaw, the name she goes by, knew the major figures in the city’s fertile art scene between 1920 and 1950, and she is one of the last voices still around to recall it. The work of many of those painters, as well as Shaw’s, will be featured in a show this summer at the Carson Street Gallery, 1102 E. Carson Street, Southside. The show runs from August 17 to September 29.

Patrick McArdle, a long-time popular music promoter who has taken a keen interest of late in organizing art shows, is presenting this first in what he hopes will be a series of historical art surveys. (Shaw’s painting shown in this article will be for sale, but the work of the other artists shown here is held in museum collections.) More than 25 local artists will be represented, including the three Shaw comments on, in her inimitable way, in what follows here.

She can’t remember a time when painting wasn’t an object of fascination...

“It was a rainy afternoon when I was 5 or 6, and up in the nursery there was this plaster wall. Before

I thought about it, I’d drawn figures all over that wall with this lovely new box of crayons I’d been given — this was a crayon job, you see. My mother came in and looked at my drawing as if it were in the Carnegie International!”

All through Peabody High School, she studied art under the school’s “most important teacher,” Jean Thoburn. So did Louise Persing and George Heppenstall, both of whom would grow up to be painters. “He probably had more talent than any other kid at Peabody, though nobody in his family ever had any talent. He was so very fragile, but tall and handsome in a weak-chinned sort of way. I guess you’d call him an aesthete — he was real floaty-aroundy.” His visionary painting style was singular in Pittsburgh with its almost surreal figures in landscapes that won him wide acclaim. Heppenstall also became a noted costume and set designer, though he died of pneumonia at age 22.

Shaw attended Carnegie Institute of Technology during the 1920s. She studied under Professor Charles J. Taylor, as well as visiting lecturer, Ian B. Stoughten Holbern, and his assistant, Alfred J. Hyslop. “Ian B. was on the Lusitania when it went down. He lost all his hair — I don’t know if it was related to the ship — but I used to take his wig up to be gummed. And his assistant would pass out every so often — he’d been mustard-gassed and shell-shocked in the war. He

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was terribly tall, 6 feet 4 inches, and I would have to straighten him out and get him to the couch.

"The two of them were looking for an assistant to go back to Carlton College in Minnesota for a year or so. The department head said, 'Shaw, you're kind of bored, why don't you go. At least you can skate.' So I hopped on a train to Chicago through to St. Paul, and my, did I have fun out there."

Hyslop went on to become a well recognized artist in the Midwest with shows at the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis, the Kansas City Art Institute, and the University of Michigan.

Shaw ran a gallery for Pittsburgh artists with two other friends, Edith Riley and Kathleen McGraw, located downtown in back of the old Nixon Theater. She remembers when John Kane would come back into town after a working spell. "He was such a sweet little man — though he couldn't have been that sweet or his wife wouldn't have taken his kids and left him. He did drink something terribly, but we used to sober him up and give him a place to stay or canvas or whatever he needed to get going again."

She also was the person designated to show Henri Matisse around the city when he arrived to jury the 1930 International. "He was a little thing and looking ill, so I bundled him up in my big red scarf and took him up Mount Washington. He went wild over the view from there and said in his thick French accent, 'My dear laddy, arrre you eloping with me?'"

A long-time member of Associated Artists of Pittsburgh, which selected her as the city's "artist of the year" in 1953, Shaw executed several public works under a Works Progress Administration grant in addition to her relatively prolific output of paintings and drawings. Two of the WPA murals she did are at the Carnegie Library in East Liberty. Slightly damaged from at least one change of location, the murals are colorful, romantic amalgamations of heroes and heroines from children's literature.

Shaw married her first husband shortly after she graduated from Carnegie Tech in 1928. "My painting slowed way down for several years then because I was all wrapped up in babies." Following a divorce 20 years later, Shaw was wed to her second husband.

With her children grown, she turned to her painting more furiously than ever. She took a winter cottage on an island in Greece and traveled widely, painting everywhere she went. "Portraits. I was always well known for my portraits," she says as she rummages through the unfinished canvas pile on her hallway. She extracts a startling likeness of herself and points to the chalk lines worked through the nose and neck areas. "Not quite right yet, I keep meaning to get this one finished."

**Alexander Kostellow**

Although Shaw doesn't recall studying directly under Kostellow, she clearly recalls having felt his presence. "He was a well-known teacher at Tech, you know. He really pushed things around there. I think he jumped ship, he wasn't born here. I don't remember when or exactly how he got here but I don't think it was legal.

"He was a dark, dramatic looking person — plum full of B.S. In fact, I don't think he had much art training, or if he did, I certainly taught him a thing or two. He was very influential in a way, since he was an extremely strict teacher."

Born in 1897 in Persia to wealthy parents, Kostellow was educated in French schools or by private tutors. He displayed an early interest in sculpture which was heavily discouraged by his father. It is reported that traveling mural painters kept his interest keen and possibly supplied him with a few materials.

During a four year stint at the University of Berlin, Kostellow objected to Germany's action during World War I and was interned in a civilian detention camp, from which he is reputed to have escaped to Holland and eventually to America. (Legend has it that he came by cattle boat, which is where Shaw probably got the notion of his having immigrated illegally.) He studied more at
the Art Students League, Columbia University, the National Academy of Art, the New York School of Fine and Applied Arts, and the Kansas City Art Institute, where he taught for a while before coming to Pittsburgh in 1929.

He belonged to Associated Artists of Pittsburgh and frequently exhibited with them (as well as in the Internationals). He executed a somewhat politically controversial mural for the WPA in the post office in Somerset, Pennsylvania. He worked in industrial design in Pittsburgh, with the United States Glass Company, Pittsburgh Reflector Company, and Columbia Radiator. He left Pittsburgh in 1939 to become a faculty member and later head of the design department at Pratt Institute in New York City.

Malcolm Parcell

“Oh, Malcolm,” says Shaw. “He grew up in Washington, Pa. He was real introverted, but heaps of natural genius. He was teaching at Washington Female Seminary when I graduated from Tech in 1928.

“His father was a minister and his younger brother was very artistic, too. Malcolm had talent from the time he was 12 years old. A real imp, he was. As he got older he used to wear this pointed cap that came way down on his forehead — I think it was to cover up hair loss.

“He was a good artist, though. Excellent portraits and not much training. He did some huge paintings in a library or hotel down there in Washington.”
Louis Pershing, “Still Life With Peonies,” date unknown, Westmoreland Museum of Art, Greensburg

In fact, it was the George Washington Hotel. He painted another mural in the William Penn Hotel in downtown Pittsburgh. In fact, he was highly trained at Carnegie Tech under George Sotter and A.W. Sparks, and was awarded numerous national prizes; his works are held by both the Carnegie Museum of Art and the Butler Art Institute in Youngstown.

**Louise Pershing**

Pershing and Shaw went to high school together before Louise’s father enrolled her in the Knox School for Girls in Cooperstown, New York. “We weren’t what I’d call intimate, but I knew her well. She studied in NY for two years and wanted me to go with her. I said no, since I’ve never had much of a taste for the place. 

“I never knew her to be friendly with anybody. She was a real loner — snooty, sometimes. She grew up on her own a lot, I think, with an aunt, as I remember. Her mother died very young.

“She was very serious about what she did, and she was a pretty good business woman. Very nice looking — dark features, not cutesie-pie, by any means. And she was certainly one of our best painters.”

Pershing had several shows in New York as well as in Pittsburgh. John O’Connor, an assistant to the director at The Carnegie, gave her a show there and then helped her locate a gallery in New York. A critic reviewing a New York show for *Arts Digest* described her work: “While some of her little canvases are slight, and some of her more seriously intended works unusually fine in studied design, the thing that strikes you first on entering this show is that the young artist is full of ideas. How far from the studio setup of still life and properties are these exuberant, and often humorous paintings.”

In an *Artnews* review of another show, Pershing’s work is mentioned closely following a one paragraph notice of a young artist from Wyoming named Jackson Pollock who was painting with “disciplined American fury” and selling his work for $25-$350.

Back in Pittsburgh, Pershing was very active in the arts community. She ran a gallery, was a founder and president of Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, and an officer of Associated Artists. Through the years she worked in many different styles and with widely varied materials. During the late 1970s, Pershing produced an unusual and intriguing body of aluminum and marble sculptures, and in 1972, AAP voted her the artist of the year.

On a recent visit to the former residence of now deceased Frederich Wagener, a critically acclaimed “naive” painter whose work was recently exhibited in the city for the first time, Shaw stood at the top of the second story landing and looked down into the hall filled with Wagener murals. “I never thought much of this untrained stuff. People ought to know how to make things look real. It’s real funny, though, how lots of room motivates people to start making marks. It’s an obsession we artists have.

“You know, I never thought of art as a career. I’ve been making marks since I was 10, or 5. I was just good at drawing. And I still draw everywhere I go.”