Passion for Paint: 
the Life of Esther Phillips

by Megan Shay
Research assistance by Patrick McArdle

“So here is my identity, Christopher... perhaps if life retain us until fame finds us, mortality will but greet us.”
— Letters to Christopher, by Merle Hoyleman

Esther Phillips's story might be a template for any number of talented young artists who grew up in America this century. A child of immigrant parents caught in the struggle for security, and later, for upward mobility, Esther was precociously ambitious, a driven, dedicated artist questing for success and recognition, restless in her keenings towards New York City. In fact, Phillips's early years were not so different from Andy Warhol's. They were born 26 years apart in Soho, at the foot of the Hill District in Pittsburgh. Their families struggled to save enough money to move to healthier, more spacious neighborhoods. Their siblings worked to support the family. Warhol, like Phillips, was obsessed with drawing and painting. Studying locally, both fed off a thriving arts community in Pittsburgh and dreamed of fame and established careers.

But that is where the similarities with Warhol's life stop. With the encouragement of his family, he won scholarships to study in the Carnegie Museum classes, while in Phillips's case, constant battles with her mother about painting as a legitimate career led to a permanent severance of their relationship. While Warhol attended Carnegie Tech for the full four years on a nest egg his father had left to see him through, Phillips was only able to attend sporadically, taking leaves to complete occasional commercial work, including murals for the Carnegie Tech cafeteria and, in 1933, for the "budget" room at Kaufmann's department store. Both Warhol and Phillips left for New York at the first opportunity; Warhol did it at age 20, with a close group of friends, while Phillips worked for years in Pittsburgh, not moving until she was in her mid-30s. And when she moved to New

Megan Shay is a sculptor who also writes about art in Pittsburgh. Patrick McArdle is an art collector and gallery exhibition curator. They wish to thank Esther Phillips's family for their patience and cooperation in this project. Photographs: David Phillipovsky (seated) came to Pittsburgh from Russia in 1905 to avoid being drafted, bringing his family — (from left) Sylvia, Barney, Dorothy, wife Nettie, and Esther. Praised by local art critics but never accepted by her mother, Esther (inset) left town 30 years later for New York, never to return.
York in 1936, she did so alone, and never to return. Phillips never courted the fame that Warhol won in New York, although she lived there most of her life, working in poverty as an artist until her sight failed her in 1969 and she could no longer paint.

Phillips’s paintings were exhibited occasionally and won critical acclaim in the 1930s in Pittsburgh, but she never became well-known anywhere. Yet her will to create, so strong that she often put shelter and sustenance second, makes her lifelong struggle important to recognize. For a few years in the 1940s she lived in a New York state mental institution, where she produced hundreds of paintings, mostly figurative watercolors. Much of this work survives. Now in the hands of her family, this collection, along with pieces that one of Phillips’s sisters rescued from her New York apartment, will serve as the basis for the first major exhibition of her work in half a century. The show runs from October 1 to October 16 at the Carson Street Gallery on Pittsburgh’s Southside. “What really interested me in the work was its emotional intensity,” says Barbara McClure, the gallery’s director. “It’s definitely modern art — it is ‘of’ the world now — but it is more accessible than most of what I see today. You don’t have to know the artist to appreciate the work. It is also very vital, like it almost doesn’t want to stay within the confines of the canvas.” McClure was sold on the strength of Phillips’s work after seeing its wide variety. “Her painting reflects what was going on in her life at a given time. To be a painter of some stature, your styles should change.”

In piecing together the details of Esther Phillips’s life through the recollections of family members and friends, and a few letters and newspaper clippings, the name of one close friend — Merle Hoyleman — recurs more than any other. A poet with a strong Pittsburgh literary underground following in the middle of the century, Hoyleman is known for a number of privately published manuscripts (Asp of the Age, Letters to Christopher, and Mind Province of the Tenth Month). Her work was also published in New Directions 1937, a poetry anthology that contained works by Jean Cocteau, William Carlos Williams, Henry Miller, e.e. cummings and Gertrude Stein. She also did historical research for the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, and compiled a book, Pittsburgh Arts and Crafts: 1786-1830. During the ’40s, she researched black history in Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh poetry and folklore, and worked on the Pennsylvania Archives.

Merle Hoyleman, by all accounts, was a secretive, physically imposing woman. Obsessed with the notion that she was being followed by the FBI or some equivalent agency out to curb artistic expression in the United States, her visions were so outlandish that some people assumed she was describing alien invasions of our planet. Henry Bursztynowicz, a professor at Carnegie Tech in the 1940s, met Hoyleman through students who were quite taken with her Letters to Christopher. He remembers her as being “on the hip-py side.” He recalls Hoyleman describing to him how “they” would get on a bus, sit next to her, and goad her into a confrontation. “She would say, ‘I know who you are and what you want and you won’t get away with it!’ Then, with a certain amount of disgust and satisfaction, she would announce that ‘they’ inevitably got off at the next stop.”

Phillips and Hoyleman met during the ’20s, and were part of a circle of aspiring artists and literary figures who met regularly at the Jewish “Y” in Pittsburgh’s Oakland district. The nationally known writer Gladys Schmidt was among the group, as was Ernie Wright, a University of Pittsburgh professor who, years later, was dismissed after being accused of communist leanings. During this time, Hoyleman and her brother lived together in Oakland, and Phillips used to arrive on Friday night with three sets of clothes, staying until Sunday night, catching up on some good meals, laundry and a bath.

Phillips lived with a friend in Oakland and was painting and exhibiting through Associated Artists of Pittsburgh at the time, winning the Pittsburgh School of Design for Women prize in 1933 for her watercolor “Looking Down the Brady Street Bridge.” In his Pittsburgh Press review that year of her paintings, Doug Naylor described the “prize-winning artist [who] reacts like a young porcupine towards people who are smug and conservative. She is forever trying to thrust needles into a person’s complacency. An interview with this young lady is hopeless. She won’t talk straight ahead, but jumps around after controversial subjects.” In the article, Phillips defends a local artist who became one of the most recognized “naive” painters in the United States, John Kane. Phillips thought Kane was “one of the most delightful painters there is anywhere.... He seems to get remarkable composition out of anything and everything he sees.” Phillips, whose paintings often suggest a deep appreciation for Kane and other artists who championed a fresh, untrained vision, was at the time of the interview looking to her own childhood neighborhood for artistic inspiration. “I think Soho has character. The houses all look as if they were ready to fall down. But they keep standing up. The steps leading down to the hollow are very crooked, and patched
with different woods, so are good for both composition and color. The roof tops are usually brilliant, in comparison to the drab gray of the houses. Soho to me represents life. The people are poor. They struggle. The place is full of energy.” Many of Phillips’s early paintings were urban landscapes incorporating aspects of the Hill’s bustling immigrant quarter.

**Born in Russia**

Esther was born on June 12, 1902, in rural European Russia. Her father, David Phillipovsky, was an inn keeper and had a small farm. Although the family was Jewish, which technically prevented them from owning property, a gentle friend from the same village is said to have arranged for the purchase of the property and for a liquor license to occur in his name.

The second child in a family of seven, Esther, with her father, mother and elder sister, emigrated to America in 1905. Five years earlier, David Phillipovsky had come to America on a scouting trip, encouraged by four brothers already in the States. Disliking New York City, he came on to Pittsburgh, where his wife’s brother had set up a credit company; he then returned to Russia. When Russia careened toward war with Japan, and Phillipovsky was drafted, he elected to flee with his family to avoid serving a country whose government sanctioned pogroms around the turn of the century embittered millions of Russian Jews.

Once settled in Pittsburgh, the Phillips family — their name now Americanized — lived in a tiny row house in the lower Hill District. Encouraged by his brother-in-law, who loaned him money and set him up with a district and clientele, Phillips began selling clothing, on credit, door to door. After a short time, he also started investing, with two partners, in real estate in the Hill and in the Mexican War streets section of the North Side.

Dorothy Rosenthal and Betty Phillips, two of Esther Phillips’s sisters who still live in Pittsburgh, remember that the Phillips family was close. They recall much storytelling, often centering on the old life in Russia. Their mother and father spoke Yiddish, Russian, Polish, and Hebrew. David Phillips was, they recall, “a scholar of the Talmud,” and the children were instilled with a healthy respect for education. All of them graduated from high school, and the two boys were sent to the University of Pittsburgh, each becoming highly successful in their respective fields of criminal law and chemistry.

Dorothy recalls Esther: “From childhood on, she was different.... She was not too involved in the family, only wanting to paint. She was always running around with drawings. She would paint in the margins of her school papers, scribbling, doodling away.” When the family moved to Jackson Street in Highland Park, Esther claimed the garret room as her studio and domain. “She’d take the ends of sheets and tear them to use to clean her brushes. My mother would raise hell about it! My mother would always be hemming the sheets. Esther would say she didn’t have anything else to use.”

There was a good deal of tension in the family around Esther, often originating with her. Her mother felt that she, like the other children, should have a job and contribute to the family. As Dorothy Rosenthal explains, “My parents felt it was important for her to establish herself as a young lady and get married.” Nothing could have been further from her plans and Esther seemed to harbor considerable resentment towards her family for not supporting her so that she could turn undiluted attention to her painting career. In addition, everyone worked to put the two boys through college, which rubbed painfully against Esther’s burning desire to study in New York or Paris. “She longed to go to Paris and join the [American] Expatriots” of the ‘20s, Dorothy remembers. Instead she was given space at the Irene Kaufmann Settlement House in the Hill District, Pittsburgh Jewry’s cultural and educational center for the first 40 years of this century. One teacher there was Samuel Rosenberg, a renowned painter whom Phillips later called a tremendous influence on her.

As soon as Esther graduated from Central High School, she and a sculptress named Sybil Barsky got an apartment together. It was a third floor garret room with two cots, a card table and a hot plate. Sybil kept a cot in the hall for her husband-to-be, Joe Grucci, a writer and poet. Sybil Grucci recalls that Phillips kept a busy social schedule, painting doggedly, though generally not in view of others. “I remember watching her paint. Her movements were very quick. She worked in watercolor. She couldn’t sustain an oil canvas — didn’t have the attention span.” Phillips’s works were primarily landscapes. The perspectives were often unusual — from rooftops or hilltops looking down on communities. Daily life is allowed to crowd the picture with a sense of bustle, while forms remain simple, undetailed. The scenes still in existence are mostly of areas of poverty or in Oakland Phillips rarely did figure studies. Hoyleman was known to say that the only person who had ever posed nude for Phillips was Gladys Schmidt.

Interviewed recently, Grucci recalled a day that Phillips sold a painting for $15 and proceeded to walk all the way downtown to Kaufmann’s to buy a hat for the entire amount, and then to walk all the way back. Mary Shaw Horn, a local painter now in her 80s, also remembers how Phillips would walk miles out to Horn’s Crafton home to show her a new painting, and to stay for a meal and a bath. Rosenthal says her sister would turn up on an acquaintance’s porch to set up her easel and paints whenever she could be assured an offer of a good meal. Esther, or “Flippy” as she was called in her circle, also took odd jobs from time to time. She also took a position as a bookkeeper but was fired shortly after starting, for drawing on the ledger sheets.

*(continued on page 122)*
Scenes From the Institution

Samples of Esther Phillips's work, all untitled, done in a New York state mental asylum, c. 1945. Originals, watercolor on paper.
Passion for Paint
Her sister Dorothy had a job at the Warner Brothers Theaters, in the Clark Building downtown, during this period. She would save enough out of her salary to pay Esther’s rent, which she recalls being $15 a month. “I couldn’t give the money to Esther — she’d take it right downtown, where she had an account for art supplies, and spend it on materials for paintings, so I had to give it to the landlady.” Rosenthal remembers that her sister asked to paint her portrait. Dorothy bought the materials and gave up every Sunday for several weeks to sit for her. “She wouldn’t talk about art with me; it was as if she thought I wasn’t artistic enough to understand. When the portrait was done, something about it didn’t satisfy Esther. She refused to let me see it, let alone have it!”

**Discovering New York**

By 1936, Phillips packed her bags and left for New York, breaking all connections with her family. Dorothy Rosenthal says that Esther, much later in her life, said that her parents’ failure to support her painting career — in particular, her mother’s refusal — figured largely in her decision to move and to break off contact with the family for some 20 years. Merle Hoyleman remained her only Pittsburgh contact. From the mid-’30s to the mid-’50s, the only record of Esther Phillips are a few letters that Hoyleman received from her and those occasionally written by friends on her behalf — and Phillips’s art, which she sent to Hoyleman, who tried, mostly in vain, to sell. (Many of these paintings will be part of the fall exhibition at Carson Street Gallery.)

It is believed that Phillips set up a sidewalk easel, from which she also displayed finished paintings. It is also likely, because of her growing number of acquaintances, that the possibility of a dealer was never far off the horizon. Her Bohemian life was not that different from that of many of her friends and the days were full of new acquaintances, some of them already nationally recognized. Benn Hecht, a writer, and Franz Klein, an Abstract Expressionist painter, were people she described “as good friends of mine.” Edna Saint Vincent Millay, a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, lived in Phillips’s neighborhood. Hans Hoffman, another Abstract Expressionist pioneer, sent his agent to buy one of Phillips’s paintings.

But by the fall of 1937, the struggle for daily sustenance seems to have caught up with Phillips, as indicated by letters that a young man named Harold Winters, a business manager and co-editor of a graphologists magazine, began writing to Hoyleman on Phillips’s behalf. His letters described Phillips’s situation as “the stark tragedy of trying to exist on nothing.” One letter: “She is without funds and has little prospect of selling her work. She is in a terribly upset condition and very high strung.” Later he excused Phillips’s apparent lack of response to letters from her Pittsburgh correspondent. “Her nervous state of mind prevents clear concentration and the effort of writing is beyond her. She says she knows you will understand.” He often thanked Hoyleman for the money — sometimes $2, sometimes $10 — that she sent Phillips. “I took the money straight to Esther in the hopes that it will encourage her that others care and are concerned for her. It is a terrible feeling to be financially disposed [speaking of himself] and unable to assist someone in worse condition, though I give her the money for transport to her prospec—
tive buyers, when I can.” He said that Phillips felt her career depended on her location in New York, and that she recently sold two canvases, so perhaps circumstances would turn for the better. The last letter from Winters is dated February 13, 1938, and announces that Phillips had had to give up her apartment, and was being accommodated by friends. “She will return to Pittsburgh, if prospects do not pull through. One cannot endure such hardships indefinitely.”

The art world in New York was, at this time, on the verge of tremendous change. With artists working steadily toward absolute abstraction in their paintings, it is easy to picture Esther Phillips, going on 40 years of age, most at home with watercolors, feeling bewildered by the rapid changes in expression and materials going on around her. It is also possible to hypothesize that this questioning of purpose and direction must have been accentuated by her difficult living conditions.

Esther’s trail, after Winters’s letters lapse, becomes next to nonexistent. Although the general sequence of events that came next is known, no one who knew Esther Phillips is able to assign dates to the events. At some point between 1940 and 1951, she spent a period of years in a mental institution. Phillips later told family members that malnutrition and depression drove her into the asylum, which the family believed was in upstate New York. The only other significant information known about this period of Phillips’s life is that Hoyleman wrote to New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 1945 to inquire about Phillips’s whereabouts. A reply came that no one there had ever heard of her. There is also an envelope to Hoyleman postmarked 1946, from Bellevue Hospital in New York, with the words “Regarding Esther Phillips” on it, but the envelope is empty.

During this time she painted prodigiously, in a style that was quite a departure from what is known of her earlier work. Working with watercolors, the medium that she preferred probably because the paints are relatively inexpensive, she produced exuberant interpretations of institutional life. The women cavort in various stages of nudity while stiff doctors and nurses appear sullen and clothed in distant doorways or overwhelmed by the bright activity of the inmates. Graceful, Matisse-like forms meld with bright background colors and startling accents of red, green or yellow hairdos, exotic jewelry, picnics and bowling lanes, and a general sense of frolic and camaraderie fill the paper. The overall simplicity of form during this time is strong. Her feeling for color is consistent with the rest of her known work, as is the humor, impudence and sense of character location.

Judging from the dates on the backs of the paper — the last one being 1951 — a dramatic change took place in Phillips’s paintings toward the end of her stay in the asylum. The backgrounds become dark and brooding. The detail in facial expressions increases, and the expressions themselves become moodier, glowing or hollow. More clothing is depicted and a sense of restriction and discontent is pervasive. The paintings present a curious sequence, from light to dark. Ordinarily, one would associate such darkness with a relapse or a disenchantment with the institution. The change, however, is so dramatic and mournful that one has to wonder if, in fact, she knew she would soon be released; perhaps this was a threat to Phillips — responsibility for her own sustenance an unwelcome sign of renewed stability.

For some time after Esther left the institution, she continued to paint in the manner that she had adopted in the asylum, although the portraits were most often single figures, which leads one to wonder if they weren’t remembrances rather than new sitters. She also began to do ceramic work, which could be produced fairly quickly and cheaply. She used low-fire glazes to paint on cheap, white tiles which she turned into belts or jewelry or sold singly as coasters, probably at her street stands. The tiles were backgrounds for cats, winsome still lifes, or variations of her asylum figures. In addition, she would mold quickly formed figurines, also based on the asylum forms.

Some time after she returned to New York, a sort of explosion occurred in her work. She briefly began using a very watery method of painting, so that a loose, scattered effect was achieved; this is especially evident in some paintings that survive from the late 1950s. Right on the tails of this body of work, Phillips went back to sketching her environment, only this time the paintings were crowded, frenetic, color-packed cityscapes fraught with myriad lines suggesting New York’s industrial lower East Side. Materials ranged from bright, pure-pigment-ed watercolors to murky impastos. But the work was always busy, intense and uncomfortable.

Phillips’s nephew, Milton Salamon, moved to New York in early 1953, and his circle soon overlapped with hers. Salamon alerted his family to Phillips’s whereabouts and living conditions — the family’s first contact with her in nearly 20 years — and his aunt and mother soon responded by establishing a fund for Phillips, to cover her rent and minimal materials. Dorothy Rosenthal remembers stashing away each week a bit of her and her husband’s income to send off to her sister. A life of economy had already prepared Phillips to make the most of this support (for instance, she frequent-
ly painted on both sides of her paper, cardboard, or posterboard) and she entered into what was probably the most comfortable time of her life.

Salamon recalls her with fondness and warmth, citing her great sense of humor, and the introductions she gave him to distinguished poets, writers and artists. “Naturally, I was distressed by her situation. I, and my family, did what we could about it, but it was a way of life for her. She had a grip on life. It was a day to day battle, but I got the definite impression that she was out to survive. Life was exciting to her, and New York was a wonderful place to be at that time. There was so much to do that was free — so much entertainment available.” He recalls Phillips and her friends going to an automat to eat ketchup on crackers with tea, or to a cafeteria where one didn’t pay until one left. “Esther and her friends had a system worked out where they would go and eat there and wait for someone out on the street to sell a painting and come in to pay for their meals. They were a very tight little group.”

Merle Hoyleman, meanwhile, had arranged for Phillips’s work from the institution to be shown at the Arts and Crafts Center (now Pittsburgh Center for the Arts), through Henry Bursztynowicz, who by the late 1950s had become director of exhibitions there. Bursztynowicz noted, reviewing Phillips’s letters recently, that she was selling ceramic tiles and jewelry at the American House, an elegant crafts shop in New York. Hoyleman brought Phillips’s work to him and he thought it had a “marvelous, naive quality.” A few of the works in the show sold, but not enough to please Phillips, whose letters to Hoyleman began urging her to turn the paintings over to her sister, Dorothy Rosenthal.

By the early ’70s, an embolism and diabetes had made Phillips legally blind. Rosenthal arrived to take her to the hospital and to make arrangements for her to enter a retirement house in Brooklyn. Phillips spent the last years of her life, through May 18, 1983, keeping to herself and hoarding batteries for her transistor radio. Her remaining family used this time to re-acquaint themselves with her. Rosenthal’s daughter, Millie Silverstein, traveled to New York to visit Phillips in the hospital and gathered her stories about meeting famous artists and New York literati. “Esther was a mythical figure to me — the aunt who ran away from home and never was found,” Silverstein said recently. “But when I went to see her in the hospital, her mind was wonderful. Her memory was so sharp, she could

Many of Phillips’s paintings from the late 1950s contain visual references to New York’s industrial lower East Side. (Original, gouache on board, untitled.)
have been a writer.”

Dorothy Rosenthal visited, too, and on her death bed, Phillips would recite poetry to her sister. “Dorothy, I think of Edna Saint Vincent Millay. You know the poem, ‘My candle burns at both ends;/It will not last the night;/But ah, my foes, and, oh, my friends — /It gives a lovely light!’ I said, ‘Esther, you don’t live that kind of life,’ and she said, ‘Maybe I did, maybe I ran too hard. Maybe I didn’t realize I was running down my health. But I was lucky. I did exactly what I wanted to do. I was happy I could paint.’”

Phillips was buried at B’Nai Israel Cemetery in Pittsburgh. Rosenthal and her husband cleared Phillips’s apartment, finding the bulk of what remains of her work. Following her death, they mounted the work and hung a small show in the mid-1980s at the Pittsburgh National Bank branch in Oakland, where a Wilkinsburg man, Ken Chute — himself a long-time friend of Hoyleman’s — saw it, and contacted the family. After Hoyleman’s death a few years ago, he came into possession of the pieces that Phillips had sent to her from New York over the years. Her work turns up elsewhere, too. One of Phillips’s nephews was at a conference in Washington, D.C. and stopped in a restaurant for lunch. There, on the wall above his booth, was a painting by Esther Phillips. The owner explained that he had purchased it from the artist when he was living in New York.

There are large gaps in what is known about Esther Phillips that further research and study may some day piece together. In the lace work of what is known, the pattern of dedication, persistence and passion for paint is rare and radiant.
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