

By Natalie Taylor, Deputy Director of Development

Donna Hollen Bolmgren



Donna Hollen Bolmgren poses in front of one of her paintings.

Donnie Day Pomeroy.

Donna Hollen Bolmgren, who recently left a thoughtful bequest to the Heinz History Center, once described herself as “a landscape painter of the mind.” The beloved and influential Pittsburgh painter made an important impact on the city’s artistic landscape. Born in 1935 in Willmar, Minnesota, she grew up on a farm and felt that she might have inherited some of

her artistic talent from her father, though “it was more about survival.” She cultivated her interest in art on her own, receiving her Art Education degree from the University of Minnesota.

Donna moved to Pittsburgh in 1958, where she was often struck by Pittsburgh’s dramatic topography, which influenced her early work. She had a goal while she was young, she said, to participate in at least one gallery show a year, which helped her focus and produce work. Although she was an art teacher for many years, “one year I made more money selling than teaching,” and so decided to become a full time studio artist.

Her work has been exhibited for the past 30 years across the United States and in Europe and Canada, and placed in private and corporate collections. Donna has received many awards including a Juror’s Award in the Associated Artist of Pittsburgh Annual Exhibition at the Carnegie Museum of Art.


Donna made the paper on which she so often painted. She first discovered papermaking at a craft show in Toronto in 1973 and, weary of the heavy lifting involved in her then-current medium of ceramics, thought, “Gee, this is a light weight material to work in ... of course, the pulp

had to have water, which is heavy!” She found the medium “infatuating and infectious” and enjoyed teaching papermaking almost as much as using it. She purchased a hollander beater to beat pulp to a paper-like paste. “It made a surface that looked as if I were painting on stone,” Donna commented. “It was very strong, I could gouge it, it would hold layers of paint and have an antique look. It is a rich surface I can’t find in a store.”

In addition to her passion for her work, Donna was passionate about local art. She served on the boards of the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts and the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh (she described herself as a “recovering board member”), and initiated the Master Visual Artists program, which recognizes and honors mature local artists whose work has shown excellence, is challenging, and has had an influence on the visual arts in the Western Pennsylvania area.

Her concern for the local art community sprang from her overall interest in people, according to her friend Coleen McKay Dingo: “She was a consummate painter whose work was always evolving and was very important to her, but everyone she encountered was equally important.” Donna’s generosity carried over after her passing in March of this year, and she left bequests to several local institutions.

Her gift will allow the History Center and its Thomas and Katherine Detre Library & Archives—which houses the archive of Western Pennsylvania artists that she helped found—continue award-winning exhibitions and programs well into the future, and the History Center is most appreciative. For information about leaving a bequest to the History Center, please contact Natalie Taylor at ngtaylor@heinzhistorycenter.org or (412) 454-6325.

Note: *Some of this article is based on an oral history conducted with Donna in 1996, available in the Detre Library & Archives.* 



***Spiritual Currents*, by Donna Hollen Bolmgren, oil on canvas.**

Photo by Gallerie Chiz.