

Farnham exhibit reveals evolution of artist

By **CINDY NICKERSON**
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

PROVINCETOWN — Artist-art historian Emily Farnham celebrated her 87th birthday on May 27. And if she made a wish for lots of happy excitement in her life, it certainly came true.

The following day she attended the opening for a fascinating retrospective of her paintings at Berta Walker Gallery. On May 30, she returned to the gallery to autograph

copies of her new book on abstract expressionist Hans Hofmann.

Art REVIEW

It's exciting, too, to see the progression of Farnham's work over the course of a half-century, ranging from the 1930s to the 1980s.

Portrait of the artist

The earliest piece is a self-portrait, painted when Farnham was about 20. She has a bob of dark brown hair, heavy-lidded eyes and cupid's-bow, red lips. A later self-portrait, dated circa 1952, focuses on the smooth, silver bun of her hair. Looking away from the viewer, Farnham holds a teacup with one hand while studying the palm of the other, as if puzzling out her fortune.

The future, if she could have foreseen it, would have included earning a doctorate in art history from Ohio State University; a long teaching career culminating with 15 years at East Carolina University in Greenville, N.C.; the acclaimed publication of her book "Charles Demuth: Behind a Laughing Mask" (University of Oklahoma Press, 1971); retirement to Provincetown about 20 years ago; and the self-publication of her latest book, "Hofmann: Abstraction as Plastic Expression

ON EXHIBIT



Emily Farnham's "Portrait of the Artist's Mother in Venice" (1942).

■ **What:** "Emily Farnham: Paintings From the '30s-'80s"

■ **Where:** Berta Walker Gallery, 208 Bradford St., Provincetown

■ **When:** noon to 5 p.m. daily (except Tuesday) through June 14

■ **Phone:** 487-6411

and Notes Made in Hofmann's Classes." Farnham, who continued with her own artwork throughout her academic career, studied with the German-American teacher in 1949 and 1950 in Provincetown and in 1953 in New York.

Farnham's early portraits are the most compelling part of the Berta Walker show. In the especially intriguing "Michigan Woman," a stylized background of smokestacks from the Ford and Oldsmobile factories establishes Detroit as the setting.

The subject — apparently a young worker dressed for a rare evening out — is really a type, not any Michigander in particular. Her head has a downward tilt, like a medieval Madonna, and is surrounded by the "halo" of a Ferris wheel, indicating the fair has come to town. Her face is innocent, yet a bit weary.

Much, much wearier-looking is the almost skeletal being in "Oklahoma Woman." A discordant background of pale green sky and orange prairie sets the mood. The woman's pale-lipped grimace of a smile and the thin breasts under her torn yellow dress also speak of the harshness of her existence.

Two views of mother

Two of the portraits are fond representations of Farnham's mother. In one, the mother's long white hair forms a sweeping cloud of softness. In the other, apparently painted during a trip to Italy in 1942, her mother sits, lovely and dignified, in front of a window affording a view of Venice.

Farnham's portraits are distinguished by definite outlines, flattened shapes and an interest in the space around objects. These same intellectual concerns remained with the artist even after her work became much more abstract. But so did the emotional edge. Even in paintings without a human presence, there is often a sense of psychological exposure. This is very strong in the wonderful "Thorns, a Pink Rose and Desire." Long red thorns, spiny branches and the fragmentation of space create the jagged setting for two pink gloves that reach for an elevated pink rose.

In her book on Hofmann, Farnham notes that Hofmann's abstractionist theories remained a mystery to some students. His talk about "plasticity"

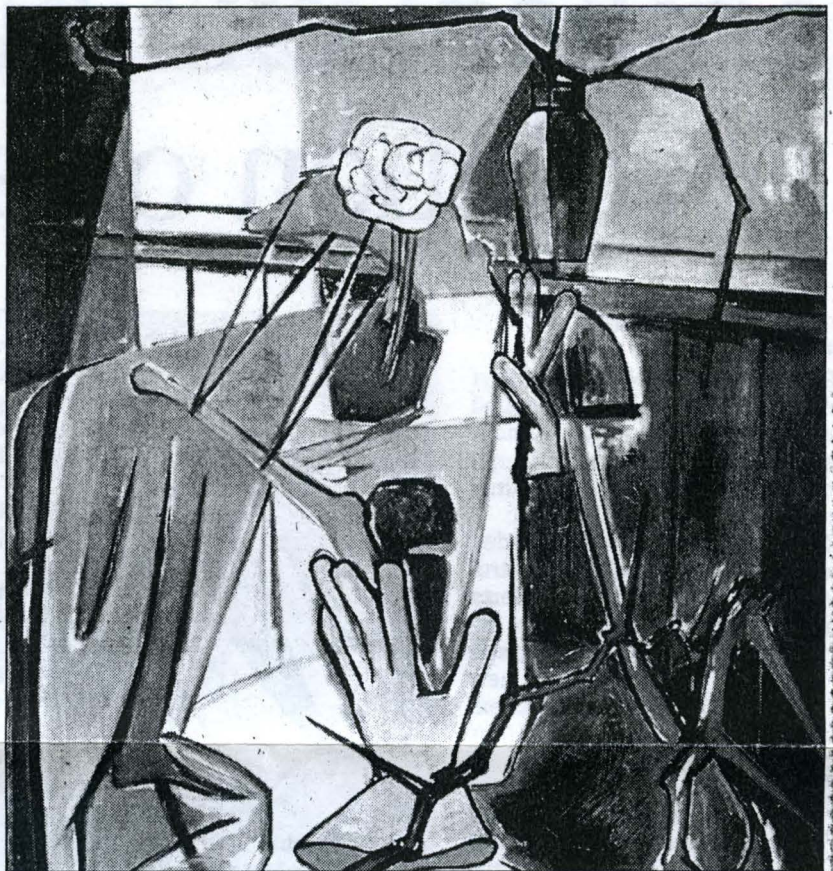
and the "push-and-pull" dynamics of painting might have escaped their understanding even if he'd spoken in the clearest English instead of with a thick Germanic accent. Farnham, however, was quickly on his wavelength. "On my part, after the first two or three days in his class, I easily understood what Hofmann was saying, and found delight in his pronunciation of 'th' as 'z,'" she says in her book.

One of the works in the show, "Beyond the Wall," was done in Hofmann's class in 1950. Perhaps the great teacher once stood facing this painting on Farnham's easel and said, "Ziss is good." Painted in dark and golden browns, light blues and red, the work certainly reveals a grasp of the "push-pull" principle. (PUSH-PULL 101: A respect for the two-dimensionality of the picture plane coupled with the illusion of a shallow space in which there's a sense of tension and movement.) In "Beyond the Wall," skewed rectangles open up the picture plane, producing the impression of a controlled explosion.

Later works

A rudimentary sun or eye is the only representational element in "Beyond the Wall." But judging from the works on view at Berta Walker, Farnham often slipped a recognizable object or two or three into her paintings even after coming under Hofmann's influence. One serene painting from 1963 contains only three round shapes. But the poetic words "The Yellow River Turns to Gold When the Moon Turns Blue" appear on a black field, conjuring up a mental image that serves as a substitute for painted objects.

From the 1970s, "Man and Wife" is a painting of two birds on a collage



Emily Farnham's "Thorns, a Pink Rose and Desire" (circa 1951) has an emotional edge that is typical of the artist's work.

of torn canvas – a work as enigmatic as it is gorgeous. The largest bird (the "man" of the title?) dominates the picture. Judging by its sleek head and talon-tipped webbed feet, it's a seagull. But its legs, feet and outstretched wing are a surprising emerald green. Above the gull is a much smaller yellow bird with a blue crest. At his feet are two speckled eggs.

"Predicament of Womankind: Bound, Gagged, Imprisoned and With Child," a piece from the early 1950s, is a more obvious feminist

statement. An abstraction of a woman with a cross-section view of a fetus in her stomach occupies the lower righthand corner of the painting. A suggestion of a window with bars appears at the top.

Farnham may have felt the oppression of sexism during her long career, but surely has done her part to break through those limitations.

Starting today, Cindy Nickerson will write a weekly art column for the Times.