



Lily Harmon and self portrait

Advocate photo by Gabriel Brooke

# Harmon: A 50-year retrospective

By Mary Abel

A 50-year retrospective of Lily Harmon's paintings, drawings and sculpture is now on view at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum through June 26.

The show is part of a traveling exhibition organized by the Wichita Art Museum and shown at the Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio.

The retrospective is representative of Harmon's work, although certain definitive pieces were not available or able to be located. "Strawberry Soda," one of Harmon's favorite paintings, sold to the now dispersed collection of the Encyclopedia Britannica, is one such missing piece.

Howard E. Wooden, director of the Wichita Art Museum, who wrote the introduction to the exhibition catalog, has loosely divided Harmon's work into three periods.

Her earliest work, done in the 1930s, is represented by such paintings as "Baba in the Print Dress" and "Family Group," which were strongly influenced by the Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and Jose Orozco.

In "My Nude Mother-In-Law" the elongated diagonal form, amid swirling drapery, is suggestive of El Greco and certain German Expressionists, although the sensuality that emerges is pure Lily Harmon.

"I think that every person is an individual and that although artists are influenced by each other, I think I'm the result of all my experiences, which are not the same as their experiences," Harmon said.

From 1942 to 1948, Harmon took up more socially conscious themes. "In the 30s and 40s we were convinced we were going to change the world," she said. "It took quite a while to become disillusioned."

"Affairs of State," influenced by her life with Joseph Hirschhorn, for whom the Washington, D.C. art museum is named and whom Harmon married in 1945, is about "old

men, young women and government."

"Donkey Game," depicting children at a party, is suggestive of the alienation and self-interest which Harmon sees so clearly in modern life. The children are completely self-absorbed. This is a theme she returns to again and again in her work.

Harmon, who has always been in love with lines, finds in drawing the "bones and flesh" of a work. By the early 60s she began to abandon earlier techniques and instead employ slender lines and refined contour drawing. "The Revolutionary" and "The Drummer," both charcoal on Japanese paper, are testaments to the artist's high level of draftsmanship.

Lily Harmon's absorption with human beings and the human situation is a recurring theme in all her work, particularly her portraits. Respect for the individuality of each sitter is reflected in the intense expression of their eyes, as they gaze directly out at the viewer. The careful rendering of personal surroundings establishes them in time and place

"I try to look deeper than the surface," Harmon said. "For many people, life is some great big joke, and the older I get the more I find people are very inward, and certainly in this day and age there is a lot of lack of communication," she said.

"But when people are posing for you they go into various stages. I'm apt to find the one I feel is most indicative of the real person. People are many things," Harmon said, and when they pose for her "the essential verities seem to come out."

Harmon's constructions, which she began to make in the mid-60s, are composed of "junk" that she has collected for years—junk "that wants to live together."

She has a nostalgia for old things and wants to preserve them. "I love them as things, sculptured things that relate

to people's lives or are beautiful in themselves," she said, "or things which no longer have any meaning," like old glove dryers.

Constructions like "My Mother the Guitar" seem to embody all the humanistic attitudes and social perceptions which become such important statements in her portraits and drawings.

Harmon first came to Provincetown briefly in 1929. In 1956 she bought a house here. She came here, she said, because it satisfies her visual needs, and is "a beautiful place to work."

She loves the town's informal atmosphere.

"Everyone here is an individual," Harmon said. "It is a fiercely independent town, filled with strong characters who wear many hats and are not always what they seem to be. I have a healthy respect for them. Life in Provincetown is a very rich, full-bodied thing and seems to bring out the best in people."

Her feelings about her retrospective, Harmon said, are that "The retrospective is not as satisfying as committing yourself to some statement. Gratification is in the doing."

Lily Harmon is a doer. "Certain people have a need for creative outlets," she said. "I am very vulnerable if not creating, like an exposed electric wire. I'm insulated if I work in a cocoon, protected by ideas.

"Life is very hard," Harmon said. "I need this as a shield against the world and also as a way of being part of it."

In an interview last October, Wooden asked Harmon which of her work's periods she considers most successful.

"Well, I think I'm just beginning to come into it," replied the artist. "One likes to think that today and tomorrow are the most important, so that I couldn't give you an answer on that."

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# Lily Harmon: portrait of a Provincetown original

By Susan Rand Brown  
BANNER STAFF

Lily Harmon (1912-1998), a central figure in Provincetown's art colony beginning in the mid-1950s until her death 40 years later, was 17 when she made her first trip to town. She planned to join Henry Hensche's summer painting classes and, for eight dollars a week, board with a Portuguese family. The rebel in her middle-class Jewish household as well as a precocious artist, Harmon intended to continue art studies during the school year. Art may be a nice hobby for a girl, her mother argued, but it's not to be taken seriously. "It's my life work," Harmon countered, and so it was.

Harmon's life work seems to have disappeared from view locally after a 1983 retrospective at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, and is ripe for rediscovery. The Ernden

Gallery, 397 Commercial St., Provincetown, will honor Harmon's life and work with a memorial exhibition of paintings, lithographs, etchings and mixed media constructions, opening at 7 p.m. Friday, Sept. 9, and continuing through Sept. 22.

That first summer in town, the dark-eyed, curly-haired Harmon scored a role as a gypsy dancer with the Provincetown Theater, and hung out with actors in candle-lit cafes. "Freehand," her highly readable autobiography (1981), reveals nothing about the impact of Hensche's impressionist teaching, except to say that his classes bored her. But the town itself penetrated her spirit: "A special light exudes from the water and sky. I am drunk with it, bathed with it, purified by it."

She returned when she was 22, honeymooning with theater producer Sidney Harmon. Their marriage was short-lived but the love affair with Provincetown continued. "The most beautiful day of all is in Provincetown, where we take a fishing boat," she writes. "Someone photographs us standing next to the mast, happy, windswept, and smiling into the future." The scene ends with Harmon snuggled into the bridal bed at the Provincetown Inn, falling asleep to the lapping sounds of the sea.

Harmon would have five husbands, and many affairs: "My only lifesaver is my work," Harmon writes about an unsettled time.

Along the way, she picketed with WPA artists, was a founder of Artists Equity, used her paint-

ings to raise money for war bonds during WW II, and met people she'd reconnect to in Provincetown: New Yorker cartoonist Mischa Richter, actor Zero Mostel, sculptor Chaim Gross and his wife, Renee, painters Milton and Sally Avery, and art dealer and gallery owner Hudson D. Walker.

Judge Welsh, Mr. Provincetown himself," Harmon writes in "Freehand."

When she sold the house to Norman Mailer, she enlarged the adjacent cottage, which still bears the name "Harmony." Its top floor facing the bay became her light-splashed painting studio.



PHOTO SUSAN RAND BROWN

Artist Lily Harmon's last self-portrait, perhaps unfinished, was worked on during the last year of her life. It is shown here with Harmon's niece Mary-Lou Weisman.

She was a people-person, comfortable with everyone from shop owners (her parents owned a New Haven clothing store) to artists, actors and heads of state. This ability to establish relationships easily was essential to her success as a portrait painter. (A "quick study" is how she characterized herself.) Family and friends from the art world, including the children of artists, were frequent subjects. She captured a cherubic Mimi Gross at age three (1943). Delicate, expressionistic portraits of Toby Mostel, "Young Man in Mandarin Jacket" (1963), and her younger daughter, Jo Ann, "Jo Ann and the Flats" (1970), are being shown at Ernden.

Her stormy decade with "uranium king" Joseph Hirschhorn, her third husband, a wheeler-dealer who amassed a huge art collection (including many of Harmon's works) and convinced Lyndon Johnson to build a Washington, D.C. museum with his name on it, is all part of the mystique of Lily Harmon. With money from the divorce settlement, she bought an apartment overlooking Manhattan's Central Park and, in 1956, a large brick house on the bay in the far East End.

After a year spent restoring the house, Harmon celebrated with an extravagant housewarming party which began at three in the afternoon and didn't end until 12 hours later. "I invite everybody who worked on the house from Tiny Rivard, the plump electrician, to the mason, the carpenters, the tile setters, and all my friends, as well as my lawyer,



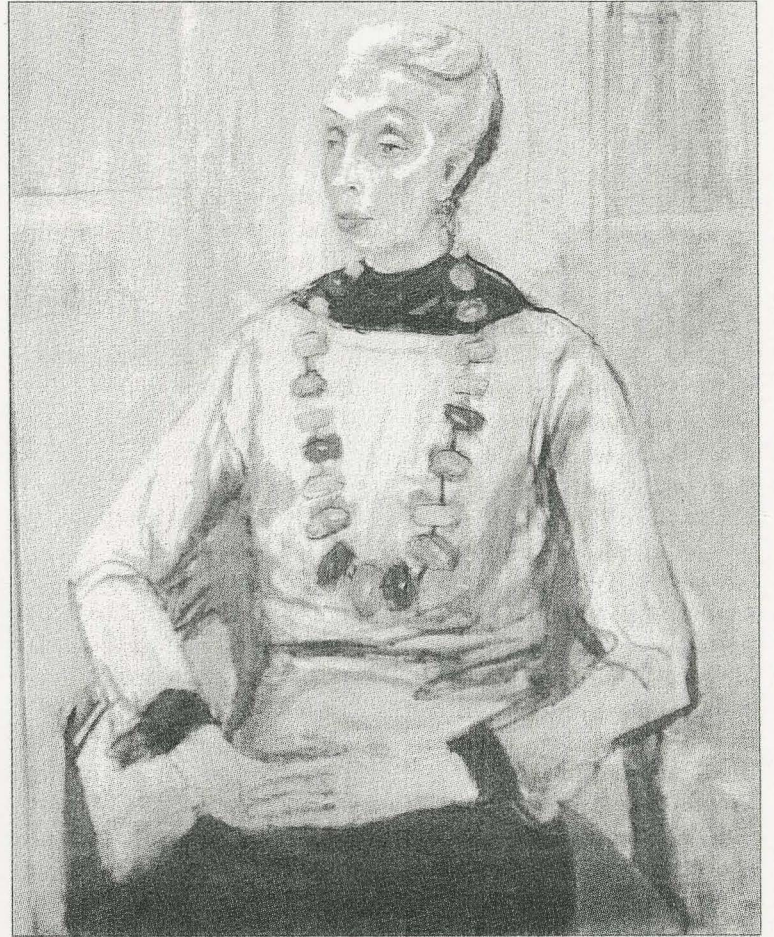
"The Yellow Flower" gives a look at another side of the artist's work.

The painter Arthur Cohen, known for iconic images of the bay, remembers his long friendship with Harmon, his East End neighbor. To him she was larger than life, impetuous and commanding, but always gracious. She painted his portrait, capturing him capturing her in "Arthur Cohen Drawing Me."

Another of Harmon's striking Provincetown portraits is of Jeanne Bultman, who knew her for many decades. "Jeanne With Amber Necklace" (1990) is included in the Ernden exhibit.

The writer Mary-Lou Weisman, Harmon's niece, spoke to the Banner in Harmon's house and studio. Weisman encouraged her aunt to write her autobiography, and moved in with Harmon in Manhattan while she was dying of pancreatic cancer. For two decades Weisman and her husband owned a home in Provincetown, to be near Aunt Lily.

Weisman remembers Har-



"Jeanne with Amber Necklace," by Lily Harmon, captures Jeanne Bultman with the characteristic verve present in Harmon's work.

she ran for school board but her freethinking views did not go over well. Opponents called her a "Communist," a stinging charge at the time, and she was badly defeated.

"Men adored her, and she adored them. I used to watch her get dressed in the morning. When she had long hair, she'd pick it up on top of her head, and stick a hair-pin into it. She was so gorgeous. Talent flowed from this woman," Weisman says.

Provincetown framemaker Henry Rothman courted her with anemones, her favorite flower, and in 1960 became her fourth husband. The marriage did not last but their friendship did. In 1972, she married Milton Schachter. Harmon's portraits of Schachter have an elemental quality, as if he were a woodsman or hunter, not a soft-spoken real estate developer known for baking bread.

This tireless chronicler of her own life painted self-portraits for decades. In one from the early 1940s, a richly painted dark green background frames her ivory skin, dark curly hair, and dreamy dark eyes. She holds brushes and a palette knife, tools of the trade. Another self-portrait, from the last year of her life, on view at Ernden, shows a white-haired, somber Harmon, painting at her easel. The canvas seems loosely defined, unfinished. It's as though the woman best-known for a vibrant life, one spent coloring outside the lines, is rehearsing for the final act of letting go.

mon doing more cooking than painting and recalls that cooking was her expression of love. She also gardened and loved to make things grow. That came from her grandmother, Baba Horowitz, an enormous influence in her life."

Harmon did many paintings of her beloved Baba, who raised her while her parents worked six days a week. One of these, "Baba, Coney Island" (1944), is also in the Ernden exhibit.

"Lily was also outrageous and loved saying outrageous things," Weisman says. "She generated an enormous amount of energy around her. She was very hard-working. She never acted rich, even when she was rich. She was not a snob; everyone she liked was her friend. She was very egalitarian, and liberal in her thinking."

In the early 1960s, Harmon and her daughters spent two winters in the brick house. The girls went to school here, and