

DOROTHY LAPHAM FERRISS (1887-1975)

In 1957 my grandparents, Hugh and Dorothy Ferriss, finished building their summer house on Warren Hill Road in Dark Entry Forest near Cornwall Bridge. It is just down the hill and through the woods from my childhood home on Bald Mountain and is the house that I now am pleased to call home.

In her early days my grandmother had a somewhat brief but successful career as a magazine illustrator in New York. Her work was regularly featured in *Vanity Fair* between 1916 and 1925. The works in this show are either the actual magazine covers and pages, or are copies of the drawings and paintings for the magazines. The original drawings and paintings are now in the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution.

What follows is an interview published in the Pen and Brush Club Newsletter, October 1971 on the occasion of a retrospective show of her work:

“It is hard to determine the exact moment of a ‘beginning’ in one’s life, but, at any rate, my professional career as an artist started in New York. In 1914 I had married Hugh Ferriss, a recent graduate of Washington University’s architectural school in St. Louis. Hugh had the opportunity to be employed in Cass Gilbert’s office in New York—a fine opening although, like all the other new men, he received no salary. Not at all fazed by our impecunious state (in fact, we found it highly romantic), we rented a studio apartment on Washington Square.

“One evening, at Mouquin’s Restaurant, I made several small sketches on cigarette papers of people eating and talking. My friends found them funny and suggested I take them to Frank Crowninshield, the editor of *Vanity Fair*. I was ushered into his office just as a would-be contributor was furiously sweeping a small mountain of rejected drawings into a large paisley shawl. Alarmed by this scene and embarrassed by having so little work to show (I had actually *sat* on my small packet of sketches), I produced them with much hesitation. To my surprise, Crowninshield liked them.

“ Within a few weeks I was hired and during the next three years served as cartoonist and illustrator and, under Crowninshield’s watchful eye, as art editor of the magazine. (‘Really, it’s wonderful how you hang on in this awful place,’ Dorothy Parker, another staff member, remarked to me one day.) On the side I also did advertising drawings and covers for both *Vanity Fair* and *Golden Book* and illustrations of night court scenes and the like for the *Tribune*. It was a hectic and, to me, wonderful life.

“All this was not entirely a matter of chance: my father was actively interested in the arts, my elder brother painted portraits, and my five aunts painted everything from doorknobs to landscapes. I had studied drawing as a small child and in my teens studied at the Art Institute of Chicago, where I conducted a class, and, later in New York, with Robert Henri.

“After my daughter Jean was born, I left the staff of *Vanity Fair*. Though I continued to freelance for a number of years, I was increasingly involved with my husband’s activities as an architect and leading member of various professional groups. The odd thing is that when I did start painting again, I found that my whole approach to the subject had changed; simply, I suspect, as a result of *thinking* about it. My commercial work had been confined to watercolor or black and white; now I sallied forth, bought canvasses and oils and began. It was an intense relief to me.

“Within a few years I joined the National Association of Women Artists and the Pen and Brush. Since 1948 I have been a frequent exhibitor, the recipient of a number of awards, and have held various offices in both organizations. I have continued to study with Guy Pene du Bois and Julian Levy, at the New School and at the Cranbrook Academy of Art. Painting remains to this day my principal concern, and painters—of whatever age or persuasion—are still my favorite people.”

I have certainly found her last statement to be true. When I was about three, my grandmother told me “You should be an artist”. I thought this was a fine idea and, after that, we got along splendidly. Early on, she taught me how to make doll clothes without any pattern, how to clean the house in 15 minutes flat so you can get on to really important things, and she bravely encouraged my cooking experiments. Later, she gave me my first set of good watercolors and we went painting together, happily criticizing each other’s efforts. She took me to great art shows and to memorable theatre in New York. Even in her last years, when her grasp of the present day had nearly gone, we could have serious talks about color, texture, line, and all of the wonderful aspects of the visual world.

Ellen Moon
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