

November 7, 2015 through January 24, 2016

The Art of Eric and Mary Ann Bransby

The Old Fiddler (Old Chris)
Eric Bransby, 1940
egg tempera on board



As the last surviving mural student of Thomas Hart Benton, 99-year-old working artist Eric Bransby continues to draw every day. A selection of 36 paintings and sculpture has been borrowed from Eric and Mary Ann Bransby's Colorado Springs home for this exhibition at the Sandzén Gallery. The Bransbys first met while attending the Kansas City Art Institute (KCAI) at the end of America's Great Depression, and were married in November of 1941 with a celebration at the school before Eric graduated and was drafted into service for World War II in 1942. The couple had one daughter, Fredericka, who is an art historian and a watercolor painting instructor now living in Massachusetts.

Both Eric and Mary Ann took painting classes from Tom Benton (1889-1975) while at the KCAI. Mary Ann Hemmie (1920-2011) took Benton's rhythm and line in new directions, as her watercolors included in this exhibition attest. Her bold colors waltz and swirl in wild abandon, expressing landscapes rather than capturing direct likenesses. She also worked as a metalsmith throughout her career, fashioning personalized jewelry and costume pieces for dance and theatre performances. Eric (born 1916) emulated Benton's approach to figure drawing and love of large-scale mural projects. He went on to create more than thirty commissions in locations around the Midwest, including murals for the WPA relief program (1942) and for schools including Kansas State University (1989), Colorado College (1948), Brigham Young University (1958), and the United States Air Force Academy (1961). He has done sweeping historical panoramas for communities in the region, such as for the Sedalia, Missouri, Municipal Building (1976), and most recently for the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center (CSFAC) in Colorado (2012).

Eric Bransby often shares anecdotes from his artistically rich life led among great artists, reflecting "I've been taken apart by a lot of good guys." He met Birger Sandzén (1871-1954) on two different occasions early in his career, the first involving a college choral trip for a vocal performance, and the second time when Sandzén visited the KCAI when Bransby was studying with Benton. Sandzén arranged for Benton to exhibit at Bethany College and McPherson High School several times during the late 1930s, along with Grant Wood (1891-1942) and John Stueart Curry (1897-1946). At that time Sandzen had the three Regionalist artists included on his syllabus for class sessions on "Modern American Painters" at Bethany College. Bransby recalls Thomas Hart Benton as a forceful teacher, imparting his own methods of constant figure drawing and clay modeling. "If you tried to do anything abstract in his class, he would kick you out."

Eric was drafted into the Army directly after graduating the spring of 1942 and assigned to the graphics division at Ft. Leavenworth in Kansas. His superiors soon had him working on a 3-panel mural for the Command Staff School building, focusing on the history of the fort. The young artist gained particularly valuable training while observing and drawing livestock, when he was told to spend several weeks at the stables drawing horses after a colonel observed his work-in-progress and demanded, "Good God, Bransby, how many bones do you think are in a horse's leg?!"

After the war, in 1945 the Bransbys moved on to Colorado Springs to study at the CSFAC with Boardman Robinson (1876-1952), Benton's mentor and the pivotal figure in beginning the American mural tradition in 1929. When Peppino Mangravite (1896-1978) was a visiting painting professor at the CSFAC in 1947, the active muralist took Bransby under his tutelage as well. Bransby had the opportunity to assist Mangravite on an ambitious project for the Cheyenne Mountain County Club, and he told Eric the plan: "I'm going to put in the first figure, you're going to do the rest." Robinson's successor as director of the CSFAC school was Jean Charlot (1898-1979), the Mexican muralist who oversaw Bransby's BA/MA practical work for Colorado College, the *Settlement of the West* (1948) in the dome of Cossitt Hall on campus. Charlot provided insight into the wall painting process done in Mexico City in the early 1920s following the Mexican Revolution, as he evaluated the young artist's work and dubbed Bransby the "bone and joint man."

Bransby was recommended by Charlot as a teaching assistant to Josef Albers (1888-1976) at Yale University, who had arrived there from the Bauhaus, Germany's modernist art school shut down by the Nazi regime before World War II. Albers' work focused on hard-edged geometry and color theory, seen in such series as his ongoing *Homage to the Square*. While Eric Bransby did not necessarily enjoy working in the abstract and Albers was a tough critic and not easily satisfied, he told Mary Ann that "I'm not in love with this guy, just need to know what he knows."

After earning an MFA degree from Yale in 1950, Eric accepted a teaching position at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, where he completed a mural for the engineering school for his thesis requirement. From Albers, Bransby gained a facility combining architectural spaces with his own figural compositions. During his tenure as the Air Force Academy's art director in the latter 1950s and early 1960s, he created the 8-panel mural *The History of Navigation* for a curved wall. For a mural competition in 1976 his proposal for the 7-panel *History of Sedalia, Missouri* painting included geometric shapes that were to be installed at an angle to the wall, changing viewer perspective as a person walked past. Bransby maintains that "A mural is not simply a big painting or a view out an imaginary window. It has an architectural function to perform." But, at the same time, the artist feels that "It's important to me to get some rhythm on the wall," echoing the sentiments of his first mentor, Thomas Hart Benton.

Eric Bransby retired from his teaching career in 1984 after twenty years as professor of art and art history at the University of Missouri at Kansas City (UMKC), and settled permanently in Colorado Springs. There, in two studios recycled from Fort Carson army mess hall buildings, the couple continued to work and exhibit. Mary Ann was a leader for the Pikes Peak Watercolor Society and the Chromatic Edge artist groups. Eric immediately undertook a restoration for the CSFAC, repainting Boardman Robinson's faded mural panels on the exterior of the art center's John Gaw Meems (1894-1983) designed building. He accepted out-of-state commissions in Illinois and Missouri. He also passed on his fresco mural painting techniques whenever he could, teaching classes at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs and workshops when requested. In 2011 while Eric was working on his most recent mural for the CSFAC building expansion, Mary Ann passed away. He added an image of her painting at an easel right next to the red-bearded Robinson as part of the story of the CSFAC and its earlier incarnation as the Broadmoor Art Academy. Sharing history through public art is crucial for future generations Bransby believes. "We'll raise people with creative and expansive minds if they grow up around this stuff...It needs to be all around."

Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery

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Gallery Hours: Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday, 1 to 5 p.m.