

# ***Beauty Born of Fire: The Enamels of Fern Aspelin Cole***

**Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery  
Lindsborg, Kansas**

**March 29 through May 31, 2020**



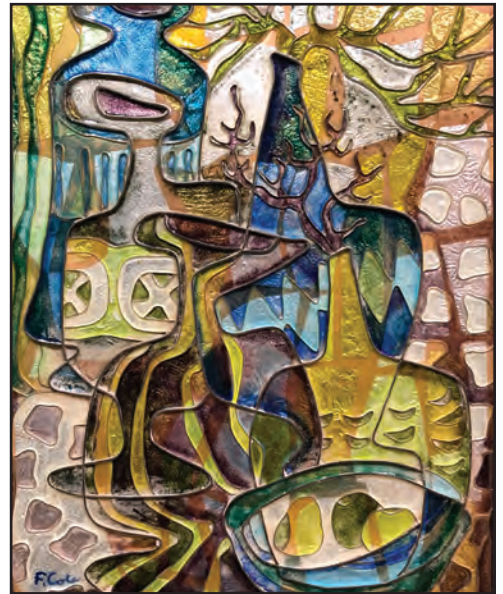
Fern Aspelin, 1940

Born on the windswept prairies of eastern Kansas on March 21, 1917, during a time of worldwide conflict and political upheaval, Fern Irene Aspelin was the youngest of the four children of Francis and Sophia (Tilberg) Aspelin. Their farmstead was one mile north of Dwight in Morris County. The area had been settled forty years

prior by Swedish immigrants who found opportunity in homesteading the virgin land. Marion Hill Lutheran Church, near the Aspelin farm home, was the center of worship and fellowship for a people proud of the traditions and heritage of their ancestors while fully embracing the promise of the future. It was into this close-knit community that Fern was born and thrived. Fern's siblings were twins Mildred and Millicent, who were eight years old when she was born, and brother Leslie, who was sixteen months older than the twins. There were also four grandparents, several aunts and uncles, and a large number of cousins in the area.

The Aspelin household was a happy, active place. Mother Sophie was a gentle but strong woman who would always accommodate a surprise dinner guest or an unplanned overnight stay. She was patient and supportive of the children in their enthusiasms and antics, their achievements and setbacks. Father Francis was a serious and successful farmer who spent his evenings engaged in his love of reading and exploring a world far beyond his physical environs. His strength of character was passed on to his children, and he influenced the development of their personalities as much as Sophie did.

These parents wisely allowed their offspring to discover their own talents and interests. They imbued the siblings with confidence, determination, and a strong faith. The children kept busy with their schooling, extra-curricular and church activities, and chores around the farm. Each achieved academically, with Leslie intrigued with all things mechanical and the twins excelling in athletics and sewing. Fern herself won first place in "Mending" and second in "Patching" in 4-H competition at the Topeka Fair in 1933. She exhibited at an early age the creativity and artistic talents that drove her career choices. A stubby



Untitled, 1963, cloisonné, 11 x 8 inches,  
Collection of Bob and Jan McLeavy



Still Life, cloisonné, 10 x 9 inches,  
Larry Nelson Family Collection



Untitled Farm Scene, circa 1940, oil on board, 20 x 24 inches,  
Larry Nelson Family Collection

pencil or a worn box of crayons and a blank sheet of paper, a drawer of fabric remnants, or a leftover can of paint all held untold possibilities. These types of ordinary objects were Fern's invitation to create and express herself.

When the twins and Leslie left for college, the Aspelin home continued to be the gathering place for classmates and cousins of the extroverted youngest daughter. However, Fern also savored quiet times when she could experiment with various artistic techniques. It was becoming apparent that art was to be a lifelong passion. After graduating from Dwight Rural High School in 1935, Fern followed the educational path of her sisters, as well as others in her extended family, by enrolling at Bethany College in Lindsborg, Kansas. While there, Fern's artistic abilities were recognized and nurtured by professor Birger Sandzén (1871-1954), the Swedish immigrant who had built up the Kansas college's art reputation. Fern was active in campus life, and was President of the Bethany College chapter of the art fraternity Delta Phi Delta, founded

by Professor Sandzén in 1920.

As a part of her senior project in 1940, Fern was commissioned by the Ladies Aid of the Presbyterian Church in Dwight to paint an altarpiece with an image of Christ. She was paid \$25 for her efforts. The 78 x 53 inch oil on board painting *The Parable of the Lost Sheep* became an important feature of the small frame building until the church closed down in 2016. At that time, the artwork was removed and repaired, and offered to Bethany College by Fern's family. The painting was hung in the newly-constructed Pearson Chapel and Welcome Center, where it was dedicated in a ceremony on September 17, 2017. It is eminently fitting that the work returned to the campus where it was conceived and executed.

Fern returned to Dwight for a year between her sophomore and junior years and taught in a one-room schoolhouse. She then completed her final two years at Bethany and graduated in the spring of 1940, and was granted an art scholarship by the college to continue study at the State University of Iowa where she worked to earn a Master of Arts degree. This was followed by teaching art in public schools in Iowa and Illinois for several years.

While attending Bethany College, Fern had met John O. Cole, a student from New York State, and the two quickly fell in love. After his graduation, John continued his studies at the University of Colorado and received a Ph.D in chemistry. The couple wed in 1944 and spent their married life in Akron, Ohio, where John was employed his entire career by the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company as a research chemist. The Coles had two children, James and Kathleen. During those busy years as a wife and mother, Fern managed to continue her artistic endeavors. By the early 1950s, she had progressed from still life painting in watercolors and oils to working primarily with ceramics and enamel. Cleveland, Ohio, proved to be a major center for enameling post World War II, as art centers in the state embraced the craft. Fern's connection with Cleveland



*The Parable of the Lost Sheep*, 1940, oil on board, 78 x 53 inches, Gift of the family to Bethany College

artist Mary Ellen McDermott provided entree into that city's enameling community.

In the enameling process, granules of glass are fired at high temperatures to fuse to metal, resulting in jewel-like glazing. Copper is the typical metal providing a base for enamel work but others can be used to good effect. For the cloisonné technique of enameling, fine metal wires are employed to separate "compartments" of glass colors, which is



*Two Women*, undated, enamel on copper, 10 x 8 inches, Greenough Collection, Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery



Untitled, 1968, cloisonné, 8 x 8 inches, Collection of Ed and Marjory Johnson

particularly suited to small pieces such as pendants and brooches.

In a 1953 letter to Dr. Sandzén, Fern wrote "At the moment I have become fascinated with enamel on metal as a painting medium on small panels. It is difficult to control as a wrong firing temperature can spoil a piece. The colors are brilliant and give a stained glass look and if kept in a small area make handsome [sic] small pictures. My production is limited however by two lively children which keep me pretty busy." (Fern Cole to Birger Sandzén, 2 Feb 1953; Sandzén Archive, Lindsborg, KS)

Throughout the next thirty years that Fern concentrated on enamels her

reputation became established in art circles all over the country. She taught at the Akron Art Institute (now the Akron Art Museum) and in the nearby Revere, Ohio School District at Bath High School, and many summers at the Penland School of Craft in North Carolina before being awarded a two-week residency to concentrate on her own work in 1972.

Fern Cole's first national exposure as an enamelist came through a showing at the Wichita Art Association (later the Wichita Center for the Arts, now Mark Arts) in the 1950s. The *Decorative Arts and Ceramics Exhibition* in the city included two of her



*Winter Night*, undated, enamel on copper mounted to wood, 13 x 12 inches, Collection of Carl and Linda Aspelin

enamels, one of which won a purchase award and entered into the center's permanent collection. She participated in four more Wichita shows in the 1950s and '60s and additional works were acquired by the Association.

In 1954, Cole's first major work in enamel, *Mardi Gras*, was juried into the 18th annual *Ceramic National* in Syracuse, New York. This complex work, composed of nineteen individual enamel panels, evokes the color, excitement and cacophony of the well-known festival. *Mardi Gras* was shown again in Wichita in 1956 and then at the 8th annual *Ohio Ceramic and Sculpture Show* at the Butler Institute of



*Cloudmobile*, undated, enamel on copper, 18 x 24 inches, Collection of Christopher and Mamy Cole



House and Trees, undated, ceramic stoneware mounted on wood, 5 x 12 inches, Collection of Bob and Jan McLeavy

American Art in Youngstown, which purchased it for their permanent collection. This significant piece is featured in the current exhibition, on temporary loan from the museum.

Another of Cole's enamel works borrowed for this exhibition, *City at Night*, is a powerful example of her later, abstract approach. Cited for special jury mention in the 1967 Cleveland Museum of Art's "May Show" (as the prestigious *Annual Exhibition of Work by Cleveland Artists and Craftsmen* was familiarly called), Fern was among the first non-Cleveland residents to be accepted into the *May Show* when it opened up to include northeastern Ohio artists from the original Western Reserve region in 1962. This enamel plaque is now in the permanent collection of the Enamel Arts Foundation of Los Angeles, and was a part of the 2016-17 traveling exhibition, *Little Dreams of Glass and Metal*, which featured many of the most prominent enamellists in the United States.

Fern Cole was a proud alumnus of her alma mater, Bethany College, and showed several times in the

Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery after it opened doors in October of 1957. She had two solo shows, March-April of 1967 and in the spring of 1971, over the month of April. A special posthumous exhibition was arranged by Gallery director and Fern's Bethany classmate Carl Wm. Peterson (1919-2009), who hand-lettered the title sign:

*This Exhibition is in Memory of a Friend  
Fern Aspelin Cole  
1917-1979*

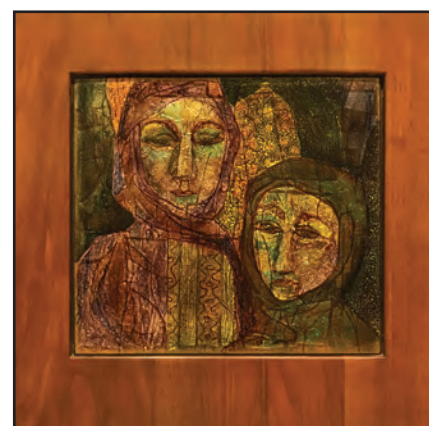
Fern Aspelin Cole died suddenly on May 9, 1979. She was only 62 years old and suffered a heart attack while planting spring flowers in her garden, another of the joys of her energetic and creative life. From her humble beginnings on a farm in Dwight, Kansas, Fern developed her artistic talents with a passion and tenacity that culminated in her recognition as one of the foremost enamellists of her time.

Fern Cole's family is honored that on the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her graduation from Bethany College her art is being featured in the 122<sup>nd</sup> Eastertide *Midwest Art Exhibition*, held at the Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery.

With thanks to the Enamel Arts Foundation's website and the exhibition catalogue, *Little Dreams of Glass and Metal*.

Marjory L. Johnson  
Hutchinson, Kansas

Bob McLeavy  
Golden, Colorado



Above, left to right: *City at Night*, 1967, enamel on copper mounted to wood, 13.325 x 12.25 inches, Enamel Arts Foundation Collection, Los Angeles; Bowl, undated, enamel on copper, 9.5 inch diameter, Collection of Ed and Marjory Johnson; *Mourners*, 1964, enamel on copper mounted to wood, 13.325 x 12.25 inches, Enamel Arts Foundation Collection, Los Angeles

## The Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery

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Cover image: detail of *Homage to Kansas*, circa 1970, enamel, 14 x 14 inches, Collection of Brooke and Kristen Schiffner