Virginia B. Evans poses in front of her Ohio River Landscape, ca. 1946.

An All-Around Artist

The name Virginia B. Evans was once well known across America. Today, it is largely forgotten, even in Ms. Evans's own backyard. What little recognition she does enjoy rests mostly in her work as a designer of Upper Ohio Valley glass during the mid-twentieth century. While her efforts in this regard are certainly noteworthy, for most of her career her primary focus was on painting, an endeavor in which she excelled and for which she won considerable acclaim during her lifetime.

A new book by West Virginia and Regional History Center director John A. Cuthbert elucidates the life of this multi-talented artist, designer and teacher. Based largely on primary resources including the artist's archives which are preserved in the WVRHC, Virginia B. Evans; An All-Around Artist was published by the WVU Libraries in partnership with the Oglebay Institute which hosted an exhibit of Evans's work earlier this year.

Born in Moundsville in 1894, Evans demonstrated exceptional artistic talent at a young age. Her ability was encouraged by her parents who enrolled her at Wheeling's Mount de Chantal Academy which boasted one of the finest arts education programs in the region during that era. Graduating in 1914, she continued her studies at schools including the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh and the Pennsylvania Academy's Chester Springs School for landscape painters.

In 1924, Evans was awarded a fellowship from the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation in New York. The fellowship enabled promising young artists to spend a period of residency at Tiffany's mansion, Laurelton Hall, on Oyster Bay, Long Island. Fellows were guided in their studies by a cadre of faculty critics including leading American painters like Childe Hassam, Charles Hawthorne and Geri Melchers.

The fact that Evans made great strides in her work during this period is evidenced by the successful debut
of her work in assorted regional and national exhibitions during the mid-1920s. She began participating in the foremost venue of her region, the juried exhibits of the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh, in 1923.

Rather than modest provincial affairs, the Associated Artists annual exhibitions attracted as many as 100 entrants from throughout the region each year. A thousand or more works were routinely submitted for selection by a jury composed without exception of figures of great prominence in American painting. In 1923, when Evans made her debut, jurors included "Ashcan" school painter George Luks; the Provincetown, Massachusetts art colony’s leading light Charles Hawthorne; and New Hope, Pennsylvania Impressionist Robert Spencer. The budding artist must have been highly gratified by the acceptance of not one, but three of her oils by such an illustrious panel in her debut year. Though all three are currently lost, the quality and Impressionist style of her work during this period is demonstrated by surviving paintings like Gloucester Garden, Ohio River Row Boats, and The Yellow Lampshade which won high praise from the eminent Pittsburgh arts critic Harvey B. Gaul when it was exhibited several years later.

Between 1926 and 1931, Evans visited Europe four times. Her initial destination was Fontainebleau, France where she spent the summer of 1926 at the Fontainebleau School of Fine Arts for American Students. Located in a wing of a royal palace dating back to the twelfth century, the school's proximity to Paris (approximately 30 miles) enabled Virginia to visit the "City of Lights" repeatedly that summer. In addition to frequenting museums and other cultural attractions, an abiding interest in fashion led her on repeated jaunts into the city's garment district. "You had better send more money," she wrote home after one shopping excursion.

Evans had no plan other than to explore and paint during her next three sojourns abroad which occurred in 1928, 1929 and 1931. Included were travels through Portugal, Spain, France, Great Britain, the Low Countries and Germany. Surviving correspondence from these trips documents her experiences and affords much insight into the character of this remarkably independent woman.

At an age when a solitary woman traveler was extremely rare, Evans made a point of always traveling alone. Compatible touring companions were not only "rare animals" but "at very best, undependable," she once wrote, adding that at the mere thought of a guided tour, "a chill runs down my spine." The truly incredible extent of her intrepid nature is demonstrated by her voyage across the Atlantic in 1931. Rather than traveling by passenger liner, she elected to make the crossing on a merchant freighter, the sole female on a ship with 34 sailors. Her intent was "to get a slow trip" in order to "study the sea."

Evans exhibited the fruits of her several European excursions in Wheeling, Pittsburgh, New York and elsewhere during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Her
quick tempera sketches, done in Portugal and elsewhere, found particular favor with the public and critics alike. Executed on black watercolor paper, these bold and deftly drawn, economical yet detailed studies reveal their maker's extraordinary sense of design and special talent for rendering perspective. After viewing an exhibit of her temperas at a Pittsburgh gallery in 1934, the city's leading art columnist, Penelope Redd, proclaimed Evans "one of the best trained and most gifted painters in this community...and in a far greater radius."

Evans's work was exhibited at many other venues in the eastern United States during the 1930s. She participated regularly in the annual exhibits of the Tiffany Foundation Fellows in New York City, and also those of the Society of Women Painters and Sculptors (now the National Association of Women Artists) to which she was elected in 1931. She had solo exhibits at New York's Studio Guild and at the New York Public Library. In 1932, her painting At the Foot of Indian Hill traveled to museums throughout the Midwest as part of a historically significant exhibition focusing on painters of "The American Scene" organized by Wilbur D. Peat of the John Herron Art Institute (now the Indianapolis Museum of Art). Her Regionalist inspired works West Liberty Hill and The McMechen Dam were included in exhibits at venues including the Albany Institute of History and Art, the Butler Art Institute (Youngstown, OH), the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery (now the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO) and at the Pasadena Art Institute several years later.

The course of Evans's career took an unexpected turn in 1942 when she was hired by Imperial Glass Corporation to develop designs for a new line of glassware based on traditional Chinese motifs. Located in Bellaire, Ohio, across the Ohio River from the lower Wheeling area, Imperial was then well known for its pressed glass tableware including its Cape Cod and Candlewick lines of glasses and bowls which could be found in households throughout America.

Evans began her assignment by conducting a thorough study of Chinese art and culture in leading museums and libraries across the country. She also endeavored to learn everything she could about the glass manufacturing business from model and mold making to marketing. Through her painstaking efforts and lofty aspirations, what was initially intended to be modest dinnerware evolved into Imperial Cathay Crystal, a distinctive line of vases, bowls, candle holders and other functional and decorative items including some of the finest pieces of molded crystal made in America. In recognition of its artistic merit, most pieces were adorned with the embossed signature of its artistic creator, "Virginia B. Evans."

Seven years in the making, Cathay Crystal was introduced to the market in 1949 with fanfare that included full-page, full-color advertisements in leading magazines including House Beautiful and House and Garden. Its carefully coordinated nationwide debut
occurred on April 25 at 61 fine retailers in 61 cities. Evans herself presided over the local premiere at the Stone and Thomas department store in Wheeling where she spoke to employees and customers about the nature and significance of the motifs featured on each product.

From a critical standpoint, Cathay Crystal proved to be a triumph, winning fans not only in the marketplace but also among connoisseurs of fine glass. In fact, a piece of Cathay Crystal was included in a "special exhibition" of Twentieth Century Glass, American and European at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in April 1950. Photographs of only a small percentage of items in that exhibition were included in the modest exhibit catalog for that event. Included among those, alongside pieces designed by Emile Galle, Rene Lalique, and Louis Comfort Tiffany, was Virginia B. Evans's Yang and Yin Ashtray.

From an economic standpoint, Cathay Crystal fared less well. Sales were hindered by a nationwide recession at the time of its release, and also by the difficulty of making intricate and finely finished items in a mass production environment. Despite these and other problems, Imperial, and its successor, Lenox Glass, continued to produce Cathay Crystal in its original form and later in colored variants until 1984. Today, it is among the most ardently collected of the myriad products issued by Imperial Glass during its long history as one of the Ohio Valley's leading glass producers.

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Far removed from the world of industrial design, Evans experienced a rejuvenation of interest in painting in her new home. Her output during the period was highly eclectic ranging from abstract pieces, often bearing titles suggestive of a musical theme, to both traditional and experimental landscapes. She had a particular fondness for pieces that might be described as sub-marine seascapes and

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still lifes depicting the flora and fauna of the ocean floor.

Evans maintained close ties with West Virginia throughout the period of her residence in Florida which lasted over a decade and a half. She returned to the Mountain State on many occasions including in 1968 when she received a solo exhibition at the Oglebay Institute, and in 1972 when she won a $1,000 commission to create an artwork for the state’s newly organized Permanent Art Collection. She returned home permanently in 1974 at the age of 81. Her final years were spent in Moundsville where she continued to be active in painting and teaching until shortly before her death in 1983.

Though Virginia B. Evans’s many accomplishments have largely faded into obscurity, there can be little doubt that she deserves recognition as one of the foremost figures in West Virginia art history of her era. Through her teaching and arts advocacy, she touched the lives of literally thousands of West Virginians and possibly just as many in neighboring states. The extensive body of her artwork which survives is worthy of enduring recognition, not only in her home state but well beyond, for its inherent quality and its evidence in representing the art of its time and place. As art critic Penelope Redd put it, Virginia B. Evans was, indeed, one of the “most gifted painters in [her] community and in a far greater radius.”

Virginia B. Evans; An All-Around Artist is available from the WVU Press at the following internet address: http://wvupressonline.com

LEAVE A LEGACY®

Make a Difference in the Lives That Follow

The State of West Virginia’s 150th birthday was an important anniversary to celebrate. While the West Virginia and Regional History Center has not been in existence quite that long, it contains countless documents and items that are 150 years old and older.

The important mission of preserving the history of our state and region is an ongoing one. Access to the priceless contents of the Center has expanded in recent years and expenses to operate have also increased.

Many appreciate how much the WVRHC adds to our knowledge base. Gift support now and in the future can assure that this growth will continue.

One option for those 70 ½ and older to consider is using funds from their IRA (up to $100,000) during 2013 to support the WVRHC. Contacting the plan administrator to send a gift check to the WVU Foundation for the benefit of the WVRHC is all that’s required. The gift can be used for acquisitions, resource conservation, staffing support, or general purposes.

Another option is to include a gift provision in a will or revocable trust; the wording “to the WVU Foundation, Inc. for the benefit of the West Virginia and Regional History Center of the WVU Libraries” is appropriate.

During A State of Minds: The Campaign for West Virginia’s University, future gift support provided by individuals through wills or revocable trusts will be counted toward the historic $750 million goal as long as they will reach age 70 by the end of the campaign on December 31, 2015. All outright gifts count regardless of the donor’s age.

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Selected Recent Accessions


Papers of Maggie Anderson (b. 1948), an Appalachian poet and professor. Includes chiefly professional papers pertaining to her writing and teaching careers, such as: material for publications; professional events (readings, workshops, etc.); student writings; correspondence; teaching materials; and awards. Material for publications includes submissions, notes, contracts, and other material for Learning By Heart: Contemporary American Poetry about School, A Space Filled with Moving, Years that Answer, After the Bell, and The Next of Us Is About to Be Born. Student writings include both Anderson's graduate work and the work of her students.


Digital image files of photographs of various subjects in northern West Virginia.


Research papers compiled by history professor Kenneth Fones-Wolf regarding his study of people in Wheeling, (West) Virginia who supported the Confederacy in 1861. Includes manuscript research notes and facsimiles of documents regarding prisoners of war; traitors; legislative petitions (topics include transportation, education, banking, temperance, and property); military service (including the Shriver Grays, a Confederate unit organized in Wheeling in 1861); religion; black newspapers; labor and socialism; and court records (includes marriages and naturalizations). Also includes material related to a class Dr. Fones-Wolf taught on these subjects.


Records of the Institute for the History of Technology and Industrial Archaeology (IHTIA), an organization affiliated with West Virginia University, including reports and research papers regarding the history of industrial technology and preservation of historical sites, particularly within West Virginia and the Mid-Atlantic region. See Historical Note for more information on the IHTIA.


Military artifacts owned by General Joseph Andrew Jackson Lightburn (1824-1901) during his service as a Union officer during the American Civil War. Gen. Lightburn
served in the western Virginia campaign of 1861, the siege of Vicksburg, and in the Atlanta Campaign, among other events. There is also a group photograph of three of General Lightburn's great grandchildren (2011). Artifacts include: battle sword with scabbard, .44 Colt Revolver (Army Model 1860), compass / sun dial, bullet mold, cap box containing one small round ball, two epaulets, storage container for epaulets, and dress sword with scabbard. There is also a group photograph of three of General Lightburn's great grandchildren (2011).


Records of the Monongalia County GreenSpace Coalition, an environmental advocacy group. Includes correspondence, minutes, reports, projects files, photographs, audiovisuals, and posters, among other material.


Ceramic and glassware items owned by Francis Harrison Pierpont (1814-1899) and his wife Julia Augusta (Robertson) Pierpont. Francis Pierpont of Monongalia and Marion counties, West Virginia, participated in the West Virginia statehood movement and served as governor of the Restored Government of Virginia during and after the Civil War.


Genealogical material regarding the Popenoe (Papineau, Popino, and other spellings) family and related families (including the Burris, Davis, Dent, Evans, Judy, Martin, Morgan, Pickett, Scott, and Snider families), compiled through the research of Oliver Popenoe. The Popenoe family in North America is traced back to Jean Papineau, a French Huguenot who immigrated to Massachusetts ca. 1700. His son Peter settled in the 1770s in what would later become Monongalia County. This collection includes narratives, family trees, maps, correspondence, research notes, photocopies from books and other publications, transcriptions of original documents, newspaper articles, land surveys, and other material.


Photocopy of eight page letter from John Spiker to his grandfather, Watson Tenney. In the letter, dated November 7, 1927, Spiker recounts his experience witnessing the Everettville Mine Disaster in Everettville, West Virginia, on April 30, 1927. He was on-site when the Federal No. 3 mine owned by New England Fuel and Transportation Company exploded, and he took part in the immediate rescue effort.


Draft book manuscripts and proofs for West Virginia's Civil War-Era Constitution: Loyal Revolution, Confederate Counter-Revolution, and the Convention of 1872, a constitutional and political study of the state's establishment written by John Edmund Stealey III, Distinguished Professor Emeritus of History at Shepherd University. A native of Clarksburg, Stealey is widely known for his work on West Virginia and Appalachia including industrial slavery, antebellum business and industry, West Virginia statehood, and nineteenth century United States legal history. Collection includes typescript penultimate revision submitted to publisher Kent State University Press (with handwritten notes), final typescript copy submitted to publisher and anonymous readers, and various sets of revised proof pages.

Strother, David Hunter. Grandfather Clock. ca. 1800-1810, 8 ft. 1 in., Gift in 2013. A&M 3939.

Grandfather clock (97 in. tall) owned by David Hunter Strother and family of the eastern panhandle of West Virginia. According to family lore, this clock was built in 1803 by a Swiss clockmaker in Martinsburg (Virginia). David Hunter Strother (1816-1888) was an illustrator and writer.

for *Harpers Monthly* magazine, whose pseudonym, "Porte Crayon," became a household word during the 1850s. He served the Union cause during the Civil War and later served as U.S. Consul General to Mexico within the Rutherford B. Hayes presidential administration.


Research papers of Festus P. Summers (1895-1971), a historian who served on the faculty of West Virginia University from 1932 to 1965 and as chairman of the history department from 1946 to 1962. Collection includes photocopied correspondence, articles, and typescripts, as well as manuscript notes. Many of the photocopies appear to have been made from Archives and Manuscript collections at the West Virginia and Regional History Center, including A&M 873, A&M 1661, A&M 1824, and A&M 2141. Topics include the West Virginia coal mine wars (1912-1927); West Virginia tax reform and economy (1900s-1950s); and individuals related to coal mining, labor, and legislation (1902-1971). These individuals include Van A. Bittner, W.E. Chilton, Justus Collins (President of Winding Gulf Colliery Company), Walter S. Hallanan, Henry D. Hatfield, M.M. Neely, C.E. Smith, and Walter R. Thurmond. Also included is a copy of a dissertation titled "Rush Dew Holt: The Boy Senator, 1905-1942," by William Ellis Coffey of WVU (1970), and a typescript copy of a manuscript by Dr. James Morton Callahan titled "History of West Virginia University: Problems and Policies." The Callahan typescript also includes annotations by Summers (ca. 1966).


One carte de visite (2 1/2 in. x 4 in.) of Confederate General Henry A. Wise in uniform. Henry Alexander Wise (1806-1876) was a United States Congressman and Governor of Virginia, as well as a general in the Confederate States Army during the American Civil War. He served as U.S. minister to Brazil from 1843-1847 during the administration of President John Tyler.