

NARRATIVE TEXTS

Mary Bonner, Artist, 1887-1935

Mary Bonner enthralled Parisian art circles with her lively Texas motifs. She was born on a genteel Louisiana plantation. After her father's death, her mother moved the family to San Antonio in 1897 so that the children could pursue a good education. Mary and her two older siblings spent summers on a ranch near Uvalde, where Mary keenly observed cowboys at work amid native Texas flora and fauna, committing precision images to memory.¹

From 1901 to 1904, Mary attended San Antonio Academy, a coeducational school at that time. Upon graduating from high school, she entered The University of Texas at Austin and attended through spring term 1906. The course of her actions for the next 16 years is unclear, but she appears to have studied art in Switzerland and Germany and returned to Texas fluent in French.²

Her career began in earnest in 1922, during a visit to the art colony at Woodstock in upstate New York. One day Mary walked four miles to confer with an expert in lithography. She arrived exhausted, and the master advised her to engage in a craft less physically demanding—something like etching. Henceforth, Mary spent her life perfecting that skill.

Moving to Paris, she apprenticed under renowned printmaker Édouard-Henri Léon, took up lodging in bohemian Montparnasse, and began submitting etchings to art shows. Her work drew acclaim for its images of broncos bucking, cowboys roping, mesquite, cactus, rattlesnakes, scorpions, weathered missions—motifs exotic and exciting to French audiences.

With several prestigious medals in hand, Mary toured the U.S. with her mentor Léon in 1927. The duo had shows in Houston, San Antonio, New York, Philadelphia, and elsewhere, becoming the talk of art salons. Although Mary traveled to Paris again, she increasingly devoted her energies to funding and preserving arts in San Antonio. The accomplished artist freely donated her works to support causes during the bleak years of the Great Depression.³

Quotations

I walked and walked for nearly two hours before I found his little house, and when I arrived and he saw my exhausted state, he declined to teach me because he said I wasn't strong enough to handle the material and implements required. "Why don't you try something light and easy, like etching?" he advised me kindly. That seemed reasonable enough.
—Mary Bonner, explaining why she took up etching⁴

*My aunt showed me a trunk full of drawings and paintings by a group of artists then not widely known called Impressionists. She felt they would be valuable in time. I often wonder what happened to them.*⁵ —William Bonner Jr., about an incident at age 9, when he was visiting his aunt Mary Bonner in her San Antonio home in the winter of 1923-1924

She was as unpretentious in manner and costume as she was in her work, and in that work she went to her own roots in Texas. . . . She was like the flavor of San Antonio.—Emily Edwards, artist friend and co-founder of the San Antonio Conservation Society⁶

Image

Caption: "Édouard Léon and Mary Bonner in his Paris studio with some of her etchings, c. 1930." Mary Carolyn Hollers George, *Mary Bonner: Impressions of a Printmaker*, and Witte Museum.



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Endnotes

¹ By far the most complete source for Mary Bonner's life is Mary Carolyn Hollers George, *Mary Bonner: Impressions of a Printmaker* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1982). Mary's childhood is discussed in pages 3-8. Other sources for biographical information include "Mary Anita Bonner," *AskART*, http://www.askart.com/askart/b/mary_anita_bonner/mary_anita_bonner.aspx (December 2, 2005); "Mary Anita Bonner," *Fine Arts of Texas, Inc.*, <http://www.texaspaintings.com/bonner.htm> (March 15, 2005); "History of Bonner Garden," *Bonner Garden Bed and Breakfast*, <http://www.bonnergarden.com/history.htm> (March 15, 2005); and Mary Carolyn Hollers George, "Bonner, Mary Anita," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/BB/fbo18.html> (March 15, 2005).

² This period is briefly discussed in George, *Mary Bonner: Impressions of a Printmaker*, p. 8, and in "Bonner, Mary Anita," *Handbook of Texas Online*.

³ For example, she produced woodcuts of the Alamo and other missions which were sold as postcards to benefit the San Antonio Conservation Society; made copies of her etchings to fund a San Antonio Art League purchase; provided limited edition prints as a bonus to donors to the Southern States Art League; and supplied a sketch of the Spanish Governor's Palace to raise funds for its maintenance. See George, *Mary Bonner: Impressions of a Printmaker*, pp. 55-58.

⁴ Penelope Borden, "Found an etcher's career at the end of a four-mile walk: Fame came quickly to Mary Bonner, San Antonian," *San Antonio Express*, February 7, 1926, cited in George, *Mary Bonner: Impressions of a Printmaker*, p. 23.

⁵ Letter from William F. Bonner Jr. to Mary Carolyn Hollers George, n.d., quoted in George, *Mary Bonner: Impressions of a Printmaker*, p. 18.

⁶ Interview, Emily Edwards to Mary Carolyn Hollers George, November 20, 1978, quoted in George, *Mary Bonner: Impressions of a Printmaker*, p. 55.