



Mary (Barton) Alexander (1828-1904), "Hexagonal Star" Quilt, c. 1880, Pieced cotton, 91 x 76-1/2 inches

SHATTERING STEREOTYPES:

Kentucky Women Artists

BY BRANDY WARREN

JOHN WARREN OAKES HAS TAUGHT ART APPRECIATION CLASSES AND HISTORY OF WOMEN ARTISTS AT WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY. HE SAID THE TEXTBOOKS WOULD TALK ABOUT HOW WOMEN ARTISTS FORMERLY HAD A PROBLEM EXHIBITING THEIR WORK AND NOT RECEIVING THE SAME TYPE OF ATTENTION AS MALE ARTISTS. ALSO, MALE TEACHERS OFTEN DID NOT KNOW HOW TO ADVISE WOMEN ART STUDENTS. SUGGESTIONS OF "MAKE COLORS STRONGER," "USE MORE CONTRAST," "MAKE THE COMPOSITION MORE DYNAMIC," AND OTHER FORMAL CRITICISMS JUST WERE NOT ALWAYS APPROPRIATE TO THE VISION OF WOMEN ARTISTS. WOMEN'S ART HAD UNIQUE PATTERNS SUCH AS REPEATING FORMS, CIRCULAR FORMS, ORGANIC FORMS AND THE CENTRAL APERTURE OR OPENING IN THE CENTER OF A PAINTING, AS DESCRIBED BY JUDY CHICAGO IN 1972.



Sarah (Gaines) Peyton (1896-1997)
Portrait of Mildred Potter Lissauer, 1946
Oil on canvas, 33 x 25 inches

Oakes didn't see these problems, at least not in Kentucky. "The situation for women artists in Kentucky may well have been unique. They have been feminists for a long time," Oakes said in his office in the Fine Arts Center, "They have long held tenure positions, and they have held powerful state positions." And in the arts, Kentucky women have challenged stereotypes of gender and the importance of painting and sculpture relative to crafts. They have emphasized their love for what they do.

Oakes and his wife, Elizabeth, a Western English professor, began biographical research about women artists in Kentucky who did work between 1850 and 1970. In Oakes' exhibit, for example, is the work of Enid Yandell, who was born in 1869. Yandell, an early feminist, studied in Chicago, New York City, Rome, and with Rodin in Paris, and was accepted as one of the



Ruth Hines Temple (1899-2000)
Main Drag, c. 1937
Pen and ink and crayon, 7-1/2 x 6-1/4 inches



Dorothy Grider (1915-)
Untitled, 1937
Oil on canvas, 25-1/2 x 20-1/4 inches



Frances (Herrick) Fowler (1864-1948), *Slave Quarters on Eighth Street*, c. 1910, Oil on canvas, 7-3/8 x 12-1/4 inches

They created art education classes, lobbied for art education in schools, and mentored other women artists. 'Their interests created a community of support.'

leading sculptors of America during her day. Emily Wolfson, born in 1915, studied with the artist Fernand Leger, traveled to Finland to study weaving, and then helped to start the Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen. After hitchhiking to New York City in 1937 after her father died, Sylvia Wald soon had work in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum, the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum. Following the example of these earlier trailblazers, women artists proliferated around the 1970s with the feminist movement, and the pace has picked up ever since.

The process of research lasted three years and was extensive. Oakes compiled research at the Kentucky archives, art galleries and museums, libraries, and state media. He and his wife developed a questionnaire that was posted in art departments, museums, galleries, and libraries across the state. As the questionnaires started coming in, Oakes was surprised. "We thought we'd find 75 artists during this time period. Instead, we found 750."

The results of their research were displayed in the Kentucky Library in an exhibit called "Kentucky Women Artists, 1850-1970." After its run in the Kentucky Library, the exhibit moved to Owensboro to join a companion exhibit titled, "Kentucky Women Artists, 1970-2000." Earlene Chelf, coordinator of marketing and special events for University Libraries and the Kentucky Museum, said the program was extremely popular.

The exhibit in the Kentucky Museum featured about 50 works from Kentucky women, and included paintings, watercolors, ceramics, jewelry, printmaking, quilting and sculptures.



John Warren Oakes

PHOTO BY SHERYL HAGAN-BOOTH

What set these women apart was their family support to be artists. Their families allowed them to study with Duveneck in Cincinnati, Eakins in Philadelphia and Rodin in Paris. Eventually, however, they came back. Oakes said when they returned, they made huge contributions. They created art education classes, lobbied for art education in schools, and mentored other women artists. "Their interests created a community of support." Additionally Kentucky women artists won awards and honors not only in Kentucky but also nationally and internationally (numbering 78 by Oakes' count). For example, self-taught Faye Becker won first prize in a National Art Festival exhibition in New York City. Fayette Barnum long served as a juror at national shows at the Art Institute in Cincinnati.

Oakes said his work with the project may not be finished for a long time. He and his wife plan to create a directory with a listing of all of the Kentucky women artists they discovered during their research. Oakes has also published several books including "Art by Computer" in 1991, and he and his wife have had an article published in *Arts Across Kentucky* about the research on Kentucky women artists. As shown by his research, women artists in Kentucky have made a difference.

Oakes, who did graduate work at Harvard University and the University of Iowa, now teaches drawing, painting and computer graphics in Western's Art Department.