Martina Gangle Curl (1906 - 1994)

Martina Gangle Curl was a painter, printmaker, and woodcarver who created figuratively based works in an emerging Northwest modernist style. A long-time dedicated labor and social activist, she often used her art to express her political beliefs.

Born near Woodland, Washington, in December 1906, Martina Gangle began work as a migrant fruit-picker by age eight and attended a small country school. At fourteen, she moved to the Lents district in Southeast Portland and entered Franklin High School, where her artistic talents received attention. The years from 1924 to 1930 found her briefly teaching elementary school and managing a boarding house. She enrolled in the Museum Art School in Portland in 1931, where her primary influence was art instructor Harry Wentz; she exhibited her work at the museum in 1932 and 1933.

By 1934, Gangle was working for the Public Works of Art Project. Three easel paintings from this period portray farm workers in rural settings, including *Prune Pickers, Farm Scene,* and *Woman Feeding Chickens.* The narratives of these early works reflect her personal experiences and struggles for economic survival. Gangle's social and political views became more formalized when she joined the Communist Party in 1936. That same year she entered the WPA Federal Art Project, where her first works included six botanical watercolors for Timberline Lodge and a number of linocuts for the WPA publication, *The Builders of the Timberline Lodge* (1937).

In 1937, Gangle exhibited a linocut at the American Artists Congress exhibit at the Portland Art Museum (PAM). In 1939, one of her linocuts was accepted for the New York World's Fair print exhibition. She also entered prints in Seattle's Northwest Printmakers Exhibit annual in 1939 and 1940.

Gangle's most important works were created for the Oregon Art Project in 1940. Two monumental murals entitled *The Columbia River Pioneer Migration*—subtitled *The Raft* and *The Homesteaders*—were created for Rose City Park Elementary School. In 1941, Gangle assisted her close friends, Arthur and Albert Runquist, on *Early Oregon*, a mural for Pendleton High School.

During World War II, Gangle found work as a welder in the Kaiser Shipyards, and she painted scenes of workers there. After the war, she once again found work in the fruit orchards, and her art of this period refocused on fellow workers. She married longtime friend and fellow radical Hank Curl in 1946. Two years later, in 1948, she exhibited work at the Oregon Art Guild exhibition at the Portland Art Museum.

While Martina Gangle Curl continued to paint beyond the 1940s, her attention became increasingly focused on political activism. She protested social injustice whenever she saw it and was arrested numerous times. In 1977, the Curls opened the John Reed Bookstore, which they operated for fifteen years. The bookstore was located in the Dekum building for ten years, and then on Southeast Hawthorne.

Curl died in Portland in 1994 at age eighty-eight. Her works are held in the collections of the Portland Art Museum, University of Oregon, and Timberline Lodge.

Written by Mark Humpal

Further Reading:

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Del French, Chauncey. *Waging War on the Home Front: An Illustrated Memoir of World War II.* Corvallis, Ore.: Oregon State University Press and Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission, 2004.

Horowitz, David A. "Martina Gangle Curl (1906-1994): People's Art and the Mothering of Humanity." *Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission*. http://www.ochcom.org/gangle/.

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