Barbara McLarty (1919-)

Barbara McLarty, a Portland gallerist, arts advocate, and publisher and editor of art books, has been an active agent on the Oregon art scene for more than half a century. The wife of painter and printmaker Jack McLarty, she has been an ardent promoter of his work. In turn, he often portrays her in his paintings, prints, and drawings as a dramatic muse with elaborate coiffures and wearing cat's-eye glasses or Japanese kimonos.

Born Barbara Lever in 1919 in Kipp, Alberta, Canada, at the age of two she moved with her family to Wedderburn on the Rogue River in Curry County. The family later settled in Myrtle Point, where Barbara attended grade school. In 1930, when she was eleven years old, the family relocated to McMinnville, where her father, Henry Work Lever, was named head of the physical education department and athletic coach at Linfield College. She attended Linfield and graduated in 1941 with a bachelor of arts degree in speech and English. She taught school in Morrow County and in Silverton before moving to Portland, where she worked as a receptionist at the Portland Art Museum. There she met Jack McLarty, who had been a student at the Museum Art School and had recently returned to Portland from New York. They married in August 1946, and he joined the faculty of the Museum School the next year. "I'll give to you an artist's life/And you will be an artist's wife," he wrote to her. Barbara McLarty assumed the role with exuberance. As she raised their children in the 1950s and 1960s and endured the death of one of their daughters in 1956, she increasingly took on the project of helping establish her husband's place and significance in Pacific Northwest art. She took a keen interest in other Oregon artists as well, especially those of the older generation, whose work she believed was neglected.

In 1961, the McLartys opened the Image Gallery in their home on Northwest Overton Street, representing the work of such veteran painters as Charles Heaney and the Runquist brothers, as well younger artists George Johanson, Harry Widman, and, of course, Jack McLarty. The McLartys operated the Image Gallery in various locations for twenty-five years, always in competition with Arlene Schnitzer's Fountain Gallery of Art, which also opened in 1961. They sold the Image Gallery in 1986.

Barbara McLarty developed a mode that combined art promotion and education. For the Image Gallery newsletter, she wrote observant commentaries on the work of individual artists, and these remain important sources in the bibliography of Pacific Northwest modernism. She edited four books of original prints by her husband: *17 Love Poems* (1966), *To His Coy Mistress* (1972), *Wind and Pines* (1977), and *The Book of Colour* (1990). She also edited the catalogues *Charles Heaney: Master of the Oregon Scene* (1980) and *Lillie Helvi Lauha: An Oregon Collection* (2001), as well as four publications on the art of Jack McLarty: *Worldwatcher: Jack McLarty* (1995), *A Printmaker's World* (1997), *Jack McLarty: Drawings* (2005), and *Jack McLarty: An Artist's Diary, 1941-2001* (2009).

Barbara McLarty lives in Portland with her husband. She continues to comment on the art scene in occasional newsletters that she mails to friends and former clients.

Written by Roger Hull

Further Reading:

McLarty, Barbara, ed. *A Printmaker's World*. Portland, Ore.: McLarty's Choice, 1997.

McLarty, Barbara, ed. *Jack McLarty: An Artist's Diary, 1941-2001.* Portland, Ore.: McLarty's Choice, 2009.

McLarty, Barbara, ed. *Jack McLarty: Drawings.* Portland, Ore.: McLarty's Choice, 2005.

McLarty, Barbara, ed. *Worldwatcher: Jack McLarty - Fifty Years (1943-1993).* Portland, Ore.: McLarty's Choice, 1995.

Copyright © 2008-2013 Portland State University