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# TALENTED

It was a time in the American art world when young women artists rarely sold their work for what equaled a small fortune. It was a time when women were separated from men during their artistic training. It was a time when women seldom shared the limelight with men when winning awards. But in the opening years of the twentieth century, while the crashing waves of the Atlantic Ocean still hushed the clamoring of European modernism, one woman—a Pennsylvanian—succeeded where few others had. She was the brilliant Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones of Philadelphia.

As a student at Philadelphia's venerable Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) from 1902 to 1909, Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones had earned nearly every award possible, including a coveted scholarship for travel throughout Europe. The *New York Times*, having declared her painting *The Porch* in an exhibition in 1907, "the most unforgettable canvas in the show," anointed her the "find of the year" in 1908.

With guileless countenance and a witty and vivacious nature, young Elizabeth, barely in her twenties, had already sold several of her oil paintings for today's equivalent of about ten thousand dollars. Her works depicted light and contemporary scenes: children roller skating, women reading or shopping, mothers pushing baby carriages in the park. After she had won an honorable mention in the prestigious Carnegie Institute's International Exhibit of 1909, *Harper's Weekly* published her work *In Rittenhouse Square* beside those of two other American winners, Bruce Crane and Edmund C. Tarbell. The magazine even suggested that

her talent exceeded that of her teacher, the internationally renowned William Merritt Chase (1848-1916).

William Merritt Chase, who dominated American painting at the turn of the century, dispatched a congratulatory note to his former pupil. "You are fully entitled to all that my teaching has done for you," he wrote. "Not a word of recommendation was ever needed from me." It was the brilliance of Sparhawk-Jones' bright brushwork and objective observation that, according to reviewers and critics, "astonished the maestros of the wide brush." And Chase was first among them.

In a scrapbook, next to an article about an award clipped from her hometown newspaper, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the young artist scribbled a quotation by poet Walt Whitman: "He only wins who goes far enough." Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones sensed the spectacular was within her reach. And then she disappeared.

Three years after her confident journal entry, Sparhawk-Jones literally dropped out of the art world. It was 1913, the year the controversial Armory Show opened in New York, in which the storm of European modernism overwhelmed its American

audience. It was the year her only sister married and moved away, leaving Elizabeth the sole provider of their domineering widowed mother. Plagued by a hereditary tendency toward mental illness, Sparhawk-Jones plummeted into severe depression, and lost all desire to paint. For three years, she retreated intermittently to a hospital where, in accordance with prevailing medical practices of the era, she was locked in a darkened room for months at a time.

Inevitably, Sparhawk-Jones would become an artist of whom, in later years, painter Marsden Hartley would write, she "has...come out of the fashionable past with a second, fresher and more interesting personality." In 1916, the year Chase died, she began the slow journey back, producing two paintings for PAFA's spring exhibition. From the beginning

# TRAGIC

of her second career, she painted ceaselessly as if to compensate for lost time, although this period of creativity did not peak for nearly twenty years. She had written to a friend, explaining that painting "is how religion possesses itself in me. It is worship for me and very continual."

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*One of Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones' earliest known works of art, an oil on canvas, is Shoe Shop, painted about 1912.*

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## The Life and Career of Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones

by Barbara Lehman Smith

# TRIUMPHANT



As the daughter of the Reverend John Sparhawk-Jones, D.D., charismatic pastor of the Calvary Presbyterian Church (now the First Presbyterian Church), Elizabeth well understood the fervor of spiritual beliefs. The Rev. Sparhawk-Jones, an older father whose interaction with his children began and ended with the dinner hour, frequently shut himself in his office to write. Between 1904 and 1910, he published three theological books that reviewers considered "highly intellectual."

Elizabeth's mother had first heard her husband preach at Calvary Presbyterian where she was a parishioner. Fifteen years his junior, Harriet Winchester married the forty-one-year-old cleric after he received some gentle prodding from his pastoral council. With a Southern aristocratic heritage and strong Presbyterian beliefs, she seemed an ideal candidate to be an exceptional minister's wife.

Elizabeth's expectations as an artist first clashed with her parents' religious principles in 1906 when she, at the age of twenty-one, won the highly coveted William Emlen Cresson Memorial European Traveling Scholarship given by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. To the surprise of her instructors and classmates, she regretfully declined the award, created in 1902, which would have offered her two years of travel and study in Europe. Although she may have refused simply out of respect for her father, who considered it scandalous for a woman to travel abroad unescorted, there seemed to be another, more troublesome problem for her parents. Elizabeth had recently revealed that she was in love with a Jewish classmate also chosen to study abroad. By remaining at home, Elizabeth quieted her mother's fear that she would do something foolish if alone on another continent with her love, someone of whom her parents for religious reasons would never approve. Harriet Sparhawk-Jones conveniently disapproved of most of her daughter's relationships—from Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Edwin Arlington Robinson to playwright Eugene O'Neill's attorney Harry Weinberg—ultimately forcing Elizabeth to remain unmarried and available as her mother's companion.

Despite remaining at home to study, Sparhawk-Jones was exposed—although somewhat reluctantly—to the seeds of American modernism by William Merritt Chase, her instructor of three years. To the young artist, Chase was more than just an extraordinary teacher; he was the authoritative male figure her life otherwise lacked. His forthright style also

helped her form her personality as an artist, best described as "all or nothing." With few exceptions, she admired those artists whom Chase admired. She also mirrored some of his more outrageous conduct. During her illness, she burned her own paintings, just as Chase routinely destroyed his paintings that he disliked.

An inspirational teacher, Chase encouraged spontaneity in his students, instructing them to paint a head in one hour, a practice considered revolutionary at the turn of the century. During his Saturday classes when several women artists came with their mothers in tow, the flamboyant Chase dazzled them. His excitement at the sight of good painting caused him to preen his thick mustache, run his fingers over the long silk cord attached to his pince-nez, adjust his turquoise necktie ring, and loudly applaud the young artist, whose mother, without fail, blushed with pure delight. Among the students who benefited from Chase's teaching were modern masters Georgia O'Keeffe, Charles Demuth, Robert Henri, Rockwell Kent, and Marsden Hartley.

William Merritt Chase shared his enthusiasm for Europe and its newest trends in art with his students, but he still became incensed when viewing abstract pencil drawings of women by French sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840-1917). In 1908, photographer and publisher Alfred Stieglitz's 291 Gallery in New York exhibited works by Rodin, and Chase sternly warned his students not to see that "junk." Despite their close relationship, his promising protégé disagreed with her mentor. In her scrapbooks, she wrote with admiration about Rodin and collected articles about him and other "modern" artists. In those pre-Armory Show days, Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones was caught in the collision of the conservative art movement and the crashing tidal wave of new ideas.

Upon the Rev. Sparhawk-Jones' sudden death in summer 1910, Elizabeth, her sister Margaret, and their mother moved from the Pine Street manse to a boarding house on Chestnut Street. Elizabeth's success as a painter took on a new meaning; it became a source of income for the family. Her father's poor investments had left the family virtually penniless.

Fortunately, in the year of her father's death, Elizabeth was enjoying unbridled successes. She was one of one hundred artists asked to exhibit in "Selected Paintings by American Artists," a traveling exhibition organized under the aus-



American master painter William Merritt Chase (1848-1916) taught Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones for three years.

pices of the Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, and Missouri's Saint Louis Art Museum. The Worcester Art Museum in Worcester, Massachusetts, in asking her to contribute to an exhibition, hailed her as "an artist of rare promise." She could not comply with the museum's request. The artist did participate in an exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C., and sold a painting entitled *Comrades* to an affluent art collector, providing her family with rent money for six months.

In 1912, a reviewer for *The Spectator* described Sparhawk-Jones' *Shop Girls*, then on exhibit at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, as "a splendidly spontaneous study, easily managed, brilliant in color, modern in treatment." A *New York Sun* critic offered even more accolades. Her paintings "fairly tingle with reality, presented in a broad, forthright manner. Her palette sings with the triumphant C major of life, as Robert Browning somewhere phrased it." That year she won the Pennsylvania Academy's Mary Smith Memorial Prize, an award established in 1879 to recognize a Philadelphia woman artist, for an oil painting entitled *In the Spring*. Chase purchased *In the Spring* for his private collection and in May lent it to the Worcester Art Museum for its fifteenth annual exhibition.

For Sparhawk-Jones, like many painters, the landmark 1913 Armory Show forever changed what was familiar by its new vision and the techniques that had developed in Europe. The exhibition of about thirteen hundred works of American and European artists—including Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Marcel Duchamp—was intended to show the developments in European art since



*The Sparhawk-Jones sisters in happier days: Elizabeth and Margaret (above); Margaret and Elizabeth (left).*



the Romantic period. The show's organizers, who included many of Chase's former students, designed the exhibition to be educational, but the press and the public considered the new styles offensive. The *New York Times* went so far as to label the new styles "pathological."

Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones had been asked to exhibit her work but had declined. Her fierce loyalty to Chase, who had been deliberately snubbed by the planners of the Armory Show, may have been one reason she chose not to participate. It is more probable, however, that she was bravely battling the initial stages of the mental illness from which her father also had suffered. A few months later, Sparhawk-Jones stopped painting, finally succumbing to a paralyzing depression that would grip her for at least three years.

Despite now living in a Spruce Street boarding house under the smothering influence of her mother, Elizabeth recuperated enough to resume painting in 1916. Her recovery required rest, so she began sleeping late, waking to eat a hearty lunch, and then retiring to her room for a long afternoon nap, a daily

regimen she kept for most of her life. Her candid sense of humor returned after the remission of her illness generating odd comments. "He dresses like a spook," she once said of an acquaintance. "He looks as if he were conceived under the floors of a cellar!" Expressing scorn for a male acquaintance planning to write a book about women, she asked, "What does he know about women? He's only had one wife." Her mother only grew more exasperated.

In 1922, Sparhawk-Jones, then thirty-seven years old, decided to spend the summer away from her mother amidst the creative atmosphere of the MacDowell Colony, a four hundred and fifty acre artists' retreat in Peterborough, New Hampshire. Still battling her illness, she wanted only to work and to guard her health.

It was at the MacDowell Colony that Sparhawk-Jones first met Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869-1935), the popular American poet who would influence her life and affect her career for more than a decade. Sparhawk-Jones and Robinson would remain in each other's lives for thirteen years, until his death at the age of sixty-six. She met him the year he won his first Pulitzer Prize; she would be with him when he accepted his second and then his third in 1928. It was during the early years of their friendship that she won the first major award since her illness when, in 1926, the Art Institute of Chicago awarded her the Kohnstamm Prize for "the most commendable painting in a show." The painting was *Ladies at the Ribbon Counter*.

To outsiders and casual acquaintances, the painter and the poet were a study in contrasts: Robinson, painfully shy, occasionally elliptical of speech, stumbling for words to converse; and Sparhawk-Jones, witty and candid, prone to squeal with laughter during conversations with friends. But their lives shared haunting parallels; both seemed driven to create works revealing a dark side. In *Richard Cory*, Robinson wrote of seemingly golden men who put bullets through their heads on calm summer nights. In *Housewives on a Holiday*, Sparhawk-Jones depicted nude housewives dancing on a cliff littered with garbage and refuse.

Robinson's mother, who had wanted a daughter, considered him a disappointment; Sparhawk-Jones' father had neglected his daughters to devote himself to his parishioners and intellectual pursuits. Both Edwin Arlington Robinson and Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones started their lives financially sound but were left financially insecure by deaths



The artist's dramatically changing styles are evidenced by *The Market* (above), painted in 1909, and *Woman with Fish* (right), executed in 1936 or 1937.

and mismanagement of funds. One bond, perhaps the most important, was spirituality, which they both sought and found in their art.

Most of the MacDowell summer art colonists assumed that "Isolt of the white hands" in Robinson's "Tristram (the conclusion)" was Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones. Was she, indeed, "Isolt with her grey eyes and her white face"? In "Tristram", the poet laments a woman who loved him with more love than he could return.

*He had been there,  
She thought, but not with her. . .  
He had not thought of her,  
Perhaps, and that was strange.  
He had been all,  
And would always be all there was for her.*

Despite Robinson's sentiment, Sparhawk-Jones harbored few illusions about their relationship. Consciously or not, she established friendships with men whom, for reasons ranging from religion to sex, she could not marry. During her relationship with Robinson, Sparhawk-Jones endured disapproving comments made by her mother, who referred to him as "a neuter," as well as the raised eyebrows of a few fellow art colony members.

During their sojourn at the art colony, she would lunch privately once a week with Robinson—the only resident to do so. Without fail, she would leave a basket of fresh fruit at his door every day. Once when she pressed him to share his feelings for her, he succinctly replied, "The less I say, the more I feel."

Not even Edwin Arlington Robinson was safe from the repartee of Sparhawk-Jones, who once "explained" why the shy poet preferred to stay in his room. According to the painter, he "locked the door on the inside, threw the key out the window, and thereafter couldn't reach it



to let himself out." Robinson, who had few possessions when he died of cancer in 1935, bequeathed his gold watch to Sparhawk-Jones. In his last days, as he slipped in and out of consciousness, he instructed his nurses not to allow her to see him on his deathbed. Whatever his reason, it did not deter her. During his final days, she faithfully kept a round-the-clock vigil on a chair outside his bed-

room door.

In *Where the Light Falls*, Robinson's biographer, Chard Powers Smith, describes Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones as a woman who, ironically, received recognition for her painting late in life. According to Smith, she remained "devoted to Robinson and after his death did a series of impressionistic representations of phases of his life. This strong sequence is perhaps his most distin-



*The artist's 1912 Shop Girls (above) differs vastly from her 1956 Startled Woman, perhaps a disturbing revelation of her emotional upheavals, which troubled her for many years.*



guished pictorial monument." This series of paintings devoted to Edwin Arlington Robinson, which included *We Buried the Moon* and *Burial of a Poet*, remained forever special to Sparhawk-Jones. "I believe these to be my best—in spite of all the darkness of the hours in which they were made," she wrote a friend.

Although Smith omits Sparhawk-Jones' early successes, he does allude to the success that she found in the second half of her life. In 1937, two years after Robinson's death, she emerged into the public eye for the first time since her illness, in a one-woman show at New York's Frank Rehn Gallery. Marsden Hartley later recounted the event. "The spirit of Robinson left a sharp mark on Sparhawk-Jones—giving her force to see life in another and tenser degree," he wrote, "for it is in the representation of the tragic spirit that she is at her best. A peculiar electricity pervades these pictures."

Through Sparhawk-Jones' recurring theme of the "tragic spirit," she revealed her sadness and frustration at life for the first time. Far from the light, happy subjects of her earlier pieces, her new works brooded over death, looked cynically at love, screamed about unfairness. Her titles of

watercolors included in an exhibition reflected this new outlook: *Injustice...Born to Trouble...On Hearing of the Death of a Friend...I Never Loved but Statues and the Dead...The Quick and the Dead*. Even paintings such as *Romantic Love* had deep, dark overtones. The death of Robinson may have stoked her creative fires, but she had learned one lesson on her own—brush work alone was, as she told a reviewer, “merely the daily dozen of an acrobat.” And so she relinquished performance for its own sake.

Sparhawk-Jones’ distinctive new style won her inclusion in *Romantic Painting in America*, published in 1943 by the Museum of Modern Art, which featured two of her paintings to “present the movements, trends or divisions in modern art.” An art critic described her as “a thinking painter, with a rare sense of the drama of poetic and romantic incident.” Her technique, in addition to her style, also elicited much praise. During an exhibit at the Rehn Gallery, her paintings *The Generations* and *Dreamer* were described as having a “vague, underwater quality,” attributed to her “working loosely with watercolor on airplane linen used by the Wright Brothers years ago.”

In a September 1944 issue of *American Artist*, a writer touted her subjects and her methods, calling her “a phenomenon.”

*Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones is something of a phenomenon in the world of paint. In her occasional exhibitions at the Rehn galleries—her latest show was held last April—she is revealed as a remarkably original, not to say eccentric, painter and person. She says she “paints on her pulse,” an idiom that more aptly describes her creative process than a thousand proper adjectives. For she is first of all an emotional painter. Her art is spiritual; her brush answers inner urges, it is a subconscious voice, a yearning voice that strives to translate deep meanings into the language of paint.*

*Few of her pictures reflect the world as seen by worldly eyes. When, infrequently, she does attempt an objective exercise she is not distinguished, although in the early years of her career she was nationally known for her painting of the contemporary scene. Her canvases depicting department store interiors—such as *The Flower Counter* were particularly popular. At 18 her pictures were being exhibited and sold. Her work, during her early twenties, was in greater demand than her brush could supply. Then came a period of ill health that interrupted her career for several years. When she finally resumed creative work her interests and her philosophy had changed. Her new vision was the vision of the inner eye, her world the world of dream reality. In her best work now, she holds the mirror not*



*up to nature but to a realm of fantasy. Sometimes it is light-hearted fantasy, more often is sombre, frequently macabre; always it wells up from the caverns of the subconscious. A well-known poet, after seeing the pictures of her last show, wrote Miss Sparhawk-Jones, “Yes, I have seen your exhibition, and I feel like the discoverer of a new archipelago of mind, where one meets packs of never-seen angels and of disbanded heroines, quite solitary in their climate of an unearthly freedom.... Your heart is full of unsuspected sundowns, and death to you is a young and beautiful sister.”*

*Miss Sparhawk-Jones has evolved a technique that is as original as her conceptions and it has excited quite a bit of comment. She will tell you it is simply pure water color applied to a fine-grained canvas, with sable brushes. But no one quite believes her; some say she must mix a paste with her colors, others think that canvas must first be coated with a gelatinous ground, still others maintain that her technical effects could only be secured with bristle brushes. All agree that her pictures are beautifully painted. “Strange,” wrote one critic, “that she is not recognized far and wide as one of the ablest, most distinguished women painters in the United States.”*

Recognition may have eluded Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones, but tragedy did not.

Two years later, Harriet Sparhawk-Jones died, forcing Elizabeth to live alone for the first time in her life. Sixty-one years old, alone, and devastated, she wrote a pitiful letter to her friend Edie Brecht: “I am broken, and it is not the tears from behind the eyes but the cry of my whole being that I utter when alone.... I shall be as brave as I know how to be.” As with Robinson’s death, her painting became her fortress. “If I can paint a bit,” she wrote, “I can collect myself.”

Finally, independence gave her the choice of where to paint, and she chose Europe, denied to her years before by her mother and father. Although living at the Hotel Saint Roman in Paris cost more than renting a room, she feared being without



*Poet E. A. Robinson (left) profoundly affected Sparhawk-Jones (above). *Injustice* (facing page) is her statement on the death of Harry Weinberg, Eugene O’Neill’s attorney.*

services hotels offered. After a lifetime of living in church manses and boarding houses, she had never developed household skills, such as operating a washing machine or even threading a needle without injuring herself. She regretted most that she had never learned to drive a car.

While living in the hotel, the bathroom doubled as her studio. She would paint for hours with the canvas propped on the bathtub as a makeshift easel and her tools scattered on the floor. In a letter to a friend, she wrote, “My life has no great excitement but pleasant moments each day. I seem to be one of the very few people who is completely content alone.”

As a testament to her impractical nature, she would frequently reward herself for a fruitful week’s work with a visit to a milliner for an extravagant hat, an indulgence she could scarcely afford. She also was very generous to her nieces, Margaret’s daughters, frequently sending them items from abroad.

When she would return to the United States, she’d visit the MacDowell Colony or Yaddo, the artists’ colony in Saratoga Springs, New York. By the end of the 1950s, her work had been acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Wichita Art Museum, and the Baltimore Museum of Art, and shown in exhibitions at many museums, including the Whitney Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, the Toledo Museum, the Worcester Art Museum, and the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Private collectors included





actor Claude Rains and Juliana Force, then director of the Whitney Museum.

At the age of seventy-nine, she was given a one-woman show at James Graham and Sons, Inc., a New York gallery. A writer in the April 1964 edition of *ARTnews* described her work as "marked at all times by romantic disposition, but showing increasing freedom in the handling of form and color. There has been an increase in the importance of color and...brushwork, which in places becomes turbulent and expressionistic." Two years later she contributed to what would be her final showing at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. The painting was prophetically entitled *A Tree in My Memory*.

In 1968, Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones died at the age of eighty-three. Upon learning of her death, friend Edie Brecht wrote to Elizabeth's sister Margaret Turnbull. "Elizabeth was not only greatly gifted, she was a rare and loving person...when I think of her long, sad life, I shake my fist in the wind." ❖

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*Barbara Lehman Smith is president of Smith Publications, a writing and design firm based in Towson, Maryland. She became familiar with the life and work of Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones after inadvertently rescuing the artist's long-forgotten scrapbooks and journals from being destroyed during the renovation of a medical center. Specializing in areas related to health, history, and the arts, the author has published in *Triathlete*, a national magazine, and her articles have appeared in regional magazines, including *Maryland Family* and *Baltimore's Child*. She received her bachelor of arts degree from the University of Maryland, College Park, and will receive her master of arts degree from the University of Baltimore this spring. She is currently working on a book about Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones.*

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