

PEYTON WRIGHT

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Vivian Springford

(American Painter, 1914-2003)



Vivian Springford was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and educated at the Spence School in New York City, and then the Art Students League. Born to a prominent family (her father was the former president and chairman of the board of Sevel, Inc, an early maker of refrigerators), she was pictured in *The New York Times* "Debutantes of the Winter Season in New York" in 1932.

Originally a portrait artist, she illustrated Albert Carr's 1938 book *Juggernaut* with portraits of twenty political dictators from the Napoleonic era to the early twentieth century.

She was championed in the late 1950s by Howard DeVree, the *New York Times* art critic, and Harold Rosenberg helped Springford get her first show at Great Jones Gallery in 1960.

The show generated much excitement and was filmed in the movie "Bowl of Cherries", in the film library of the Museum of Modern Art. Prominent collectors such as Leon Mnuchin purchased paintings from the exhibition.

Natalie Edgar reviewed the show for *Art News*, and wrote:

"Vivian Springford has a freely brushed calligraphic style with the fantasy and naturalism of Chinese derivation. An arrested immanence results."

James R. Mellow wrote in the *Arts Magazine*:

"Calligraphy is said to have played an important part in the development of her style, but its effect upon the dominating blacks of these paintings is kinesthetic rather than formal – that is, it supplies the impetuous but not the resultant shape of things. The work itself is notable for a first one-man showing."

And Peter Wood reviewed the show at length in *The Villager*, stating:

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"... Miss Springford's pictures are of a kind – all roughly four by five feet, all on unprepared canvas, all containing a major black form soaked up by the canvas, all embellished with colors, sprays and swirls of paint. In a sense, one might say that these works, too, are mere variations on a theme. But for me they have something more; they have an emotional content which I found lacking in the Camino [gallery] pictures. And this it seems to me is the essential difference between good abstract expressionism and bad. Miss Springford's works evokes the feeling of some primeval or post-atomic chaos, or perhaps a conflict of the mind inexpressible in words. I saw darkness and fire and motion there..."

Springford was attracted early on to Chinese calligraphy:

"I liked the direct approach of the early Chinese painters. Whatever they put down on paper stayed there; they didn't edit. They didn't copy nature, either; they interpreted it. In fact, some of the older Chinese drawings are much more abstract than anything done today. I adapted their rhythm and free motion to develop my own abstract paintings."

Springford shared studio space with the Asian American artist Walasse Ting for ten years, and helped him with the translations of his poetry. Through her association with Ting, Springford developed close contacts with artists such as Pierre Alechinsky, Sam Francis and Karel Appel. Springford wrote "My painting is my own small plot of energy, in terms of color and movement, in the universal whole."

Springford also had a solo show at Preston Gallery in NYC in 1963, but became a reclusive artist after that, only showing in a few group exhibitions at the request of fellow artists and friends. She otherwise refused to sell or promote her own works. She worked in her NY studio through the mid 1980s until macular degeneration rendered her blind.

Having no immediate family, she was unable to leave her small New York midtown apartment. In 1998, a volunteer from United-Neighbors-of-the-East-Side, which works with New York City's elderly "shut-ins", was visiting with Springford and learned about a storage room in Chelsea that held her life's work. They visited the room and found more than 40 years worth of paintings and drawings covered in plastic and a decades worth of dust since the room was last opened. The volunteer brought samples of Springford's work to Gary Snyder, an art dealer known for his revisionist exhibitions of historically rooted art and artists. Snyder immediately recognized its importance and began the process of cleaning, restoring, and showing her work. Snyder's first exhibition of Springford's work in 1998 was nearly sold out before its opening.

When Vivian Springford died in 2003, Gary Snyder presented a memorial show that was well received .

Doug McClemon reviewed the exhibition for Artnews, ending with:

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"...The influences of artists such as Georgia O'Keeffe and Sam Francis are difficult not to notice, but Springford's experiments with making acrylics behave like watercolors were original and skillful, and the results convey a rare sense of magic."

Grace Glueck reviewed the show in The New York Times:

"The recent rediscovery of Springford's work, which lay in a warehouse for years after this reclusive painter stopped exhibiting, has generated her second show here. An American painter who started out as a portraitist and then came into the orbit of the New York School, Springford (1914-2003) was introduced to Asian art and philosophy by her friend the poet Walasse Ting. Her strong sense of color is tempered by an Asian feeling for delicate, calligraphic line, seen in works of the 1960's. These exuberant linear scribbles and doodlings, stained and painted on paper or canvas, are enhanced and sometimes almost overcome by areas of black paint, worked onto the surface by stain, brushing or other means.

In the *Tanzania* and *Martinique* series -- canvases from the 1970s -- she has gravitated to stain painting and lightened her palette. Big, blotchy cabbage-like shapes are built up in overlays of color that usually progress from light and translucent at the edges to intense opacity at the center."

As the history of Abstract Expressionism continues to be explored and defined, Vivian Springford is emerging as an important figure, who developed a sophisticated and original stain style of painting.