

PEYTON WRIGHT

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Emmy Lou Packard

(1914-1998)

Emmy Lou Packard was born in California in 1914. Her father, Walter Packard, was an internationally known agronomist. In 1927, taking his family with him, he went to Mexico City as a consultant on the government's historic land reform program.

There, Ms. Packard, who drew and painted precociously at the age of 13, was taken by her mother to meet muralist Rivera and his wife, Frida

Kahlo. Rivera later recalled the beauty of the little girl "with the face of a French Gothic angel plucked from the reliefs of Chartres." When he came to San Francisco to do a fresco for the Treasure Island World's Fair in 1940 (now at City College of San Francisco), she was his full-time assistant and painted side by side with him on many areas of the 1,650-square-foot mural.

By then, Ms. Packard was a full-fledged artist who had studied from 1932 to 1936 at UC Berkeley, where she was art editor of the Daily Californian, the student newspaper, and of Occident, the campus literary magazine. She was also the first female editor of the Pelican, the humor magazine.

In 1934, she startled her sorority sisters when she eloped to Nevada with the brilliant young architect Burton Cairns. She then astonished the student body when she brought her baby, Donald Cairns, to class with her. In 1939, her husband died in an auto crash.

Ms. Packard returned to Mexico to live and work with Rivera and Kahlo and took the famous photographs of them that are now icons of 20th century art. She also did some 300 oil paintings, water colors and drawings that she exhibited in 1941 and 1942 at galleries in Los Angeles and San Francisco, and a one-woman show of her works in oils at the San Francisco Museum of Art (now the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art), which firmly established her career.

By 1943, she left aside her fine art to work as an engineering drafter in defense industries, most notably in the Kaiser shipyards. As the war wound down, she was able to do some 100 shipyard paintings, dominated by cranes and other heavy machinery, but light and optimistic in feeling. During that exceptionally productive period, she experimented with plastics in light sculptures, illustrated third-grade textbooks for the San Francisco public schools, organized the annual San Francisco Arts Festival and was a founder of Artists Equity, a group very like a union for artists.

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A memorable moment, in 1949, was a group show of her paintings, together with work by her friends Robert McChesney, Edward Corbett and her future husband, Byron Randall. By 1952, she was producing wood and linoleum prints of local crab fishermen, net menders, artichoke pickers and other workers. Another trip to Mexico enabled her to study new developments in mural techniques. She did many murals and other adornments for schools, and had the happy idea of inviting the children to help make mosaics or assemblages of seashells, pebbles, broken ceramic tiles and other found objects.

Among her most interesting commissions were for murals and room decorations for the Lurline, Mariposa and other Matson Line cruise ships.

In 1960, she and Randall moved to a Victorian house facing the sea in Mendocino, where they had charming studios and a house gallery. She became known as a formidable environmentalist, helping to protect the shoreline from ugly developments. With equal fervor, she opposed the Vietnam War and donated posters and drawings to groups such as Women for Peace.

But her marriage to Randall was dissolving. In 1969, she returned alone to San Francisco, where she became a much-loved figure in the Mission District, championing its Latino culture a generation before others discovered its vitality and charm. She also led the victorious fight to save Anton Refregier's frescoes depicting California history in the lobby of the Rincon Annex post office on lower Mission Street.

She spent much of her later years preparing a biography and appreciation of Rivera, illustrated with her photographs. She was unable to finish the work.