

Feature

Indian Space Painters movement explained in Crystal Bridges exhibit

Ruth Lewin remembered as one of 'Space Painters'

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by Becca Martin-Brown

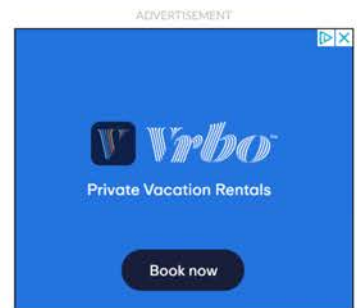


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"I was extremely lucky to get in touch with her family, including her son Robert Seliger, who generously introduced me to some of his mother's surviving work," says Christopher T. Green, curator of the "Space Makers" exhibit at Crystal Bridges Museum, says of Ruth Lewin. "He had coincidentally been in conversation with Hollis Taggart Gallery to represent her estate, and the timing worked out perfectly to include several of her incredible paintings at Crystal Bridges following a brilliant joint show at Hollis Taggart in New York between Lewin and her husband, Charles Seliger." (Courtesy Image/Estate of Ruth Lewin via Crystal Bridges Museum)

"Space Makers," a new exhibition at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, focuses on an art movement known as the Indian Space Painters. That does not mean art of the American West -- no galloping horses by Remington or Russell, no sweeping vistas by Bierstadt or Moran. Neither does it mean traditional art by Indigenous artists.



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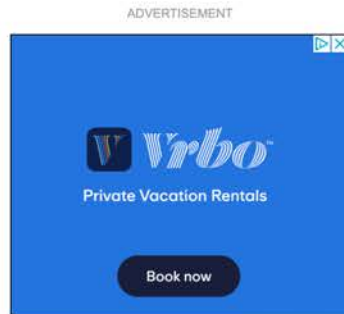




What visitors will see is how Native American art influenced American modernist artists after World War II and "how contemporary Indigenous artists continue to innovate on the shared visual elements to create new artistic worlds."

Harold Porcher, director of modern and post-war art for Swann Auction Galleries, describes the Indian Space Painters movement this way:

At the end of World War II American artists were seeking to create a form of modernism that was uniquely their own. The Indian Space Painters "shared no goal nor manifesto, but ... found a mutual admiration for Native American art. In the indigenous art of the Americas they found ties to the visual devices they saw in the European modern works, such as flattening of the picture plane, amplification of negative space, and abstraction of forms." They did not intend to transfer Indigenous symbolism to their work, Porcher says, but found "anthropomorphic interlocking subject matter that lent itself to the Surrealist abstraction they were already emulating in their own paintings."



Christopher T. Green, Ph.D., visiting assistant professor of Art History at Swarthmore College, curated the Crystal Bridges exhibit. A scholar "whose work and research focuses on the relationship between Native North American art and Euro-American modernism," he says "the Indian Space Painters have never had a museum exhibition dedicated to the movement nor to its legacy and impact on and interconnectedness to broader histories of modern American art, so this is a long time coming."

"We are better positioned to see 'Indian Space Painting' as one node in a broader history of complex aesthetic exchange at the center of American modernism," Green adds, "and audiences are better situated to appreciate those complexities rather than relegate them to the dust bin of history."

Ruth Lewin, he says, was "a key part of the movement."

"Her work is rare and in very few museum collections," Green says. "It was essential to include Lewin's work in order to demonstrate the breadth of the Indian Space Painters."

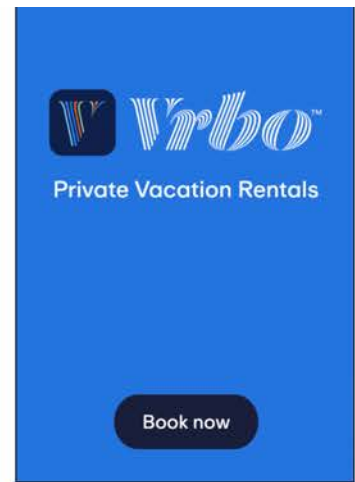


Lewin's family "couldn't be happier to facilitate bringing her artistic vision out into the world once again!"

"Since Ruth's artwork had been tucked away for so long, we feel like we are getting to know her along with everyone else who is seeing her work," says granddaughter Alison Seliger-Schamberg, who represents Lewin's estate. Seliger-Schamberg gathered input from her father, Robert Seliger, Lewin's elder son, and his brother Mark Seliger to describe Lewin's life, work and rediscovery in this Q&A.

Q. When did you realize how important your mother's/grandmother's legacy was in the art world?

A. The "Space Makers" exhibit at Crystal Bridges was the first time that we came to formally understand more about Ruth's place in the Indian Space Painters movement, and her role in some of the cross-influences between the vision of the Space Painters and Indigenous American



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Ruth had an active art career as a teenager and young adult in the 1940s. She was showing art at at least one gallery, and works of hers from the 1940s through 1950 are included in the National Gallery of Art.

After her marriage to artist Charles Seliger in 1948, Ruth chose to forgo the notoriety of a formal art career and split her time between her artwork, raising a family, and her many varied creative pursuits (working as a draftsman, creating stage sets, and running her home decor business Follies Associates). It was at nighttime, after her sons were asleep in their bunk beds, that both Charles and Ruth relaxed separately into their artwork. They both painted well into the night.

After her premature death from cancer in 1975, her artwork was tucked away neatly in boxes. It was shown once as part of the 1991 exhibit "The Indian Space Painters: Native American Sources for American Abstract Art" at Baruch College in New York. We only discovered it in the closet one year ago, in May 2023!

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Q. Was there someone or something that inspired your mother/grandmother to become an artist?

A. Both Charles and Ruth grew up in complicated families in which their parents were consumed by their own issues. Their only escapes were through their art, and they connected on this.

In Ruth's private late-night art, she seemed to venture from her troubled past to a future of hope and even jubilation. At times she painted scenes of despair and desperation, at other times jolly whimsical pen drawings, and at yet other times she designed stage sets, a Sabbath plate, and a wide variety of other creations. She was always finding new ways to apply her creative energy using a range of media and techniques.

Q. Do you know how your mother/grandmother got interested in the Indian Space Painters movement?

A. Ruth grew up in an extremely observant and strict home, and she must have found it stifling. We can only imagine how quickly her world opened up when she attended the Art Students League of New York and discovered the Indian Space Painters movement through the mentorship and teaching of painter Will Barnet. New ideas and influences must have filled her longing for exposure to fresh perspectives. In the specific case of influences from Indigenous art and culture, we suspect that it was a profoundly warm, welcoming, and life-affirming alternative to what Ruth had lived with in her childhood home.

Seliger-Schamberg says that "while many female artists of that time -- and maybe of current times too! -- were choosing between their profession or raising a family, Ruth made the conscious choice to be both an artist and an adoring mother and homemaker.

"The recent 'rediscovery' of this under-recognized, highly talented, and multi-skilled artist is very exciting"

FAQ

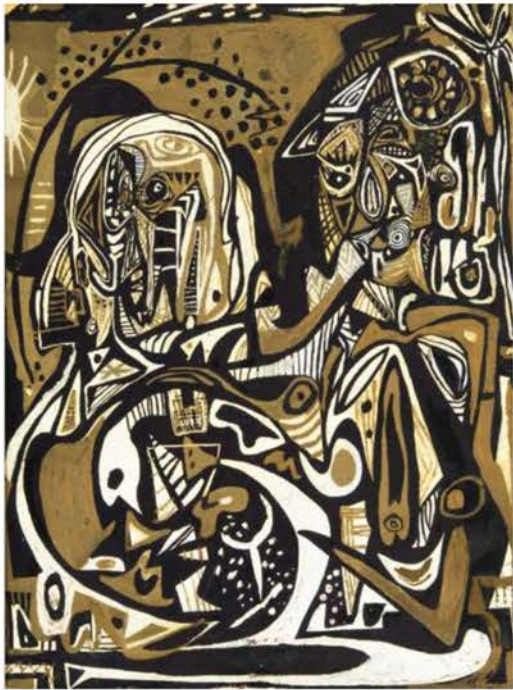
'Space Makers: Indigenous Expression and a New American Art'

WHEN -- Through Sept. 30

WHERE -- Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville

COST -- Free

INFO -- crystalbridges.org



"Thanks to the incredible surge in mainstream interest in and historical attention to modern and contemporary Indigenous art, we are now in a place to have more informed and less one-sided conversations about not only the historic avant-garde's interest in Native American art and forms, but also how that interest was mutual, multi-directional, and intersected with the histories of modern Native art," says Green. "It was essential to include Lewin's work in order to demonstrate the breadth of the Indian Space Painters." (Courtesy Image/Estate of Ruth Lewin via Crystal Bridges Museum)





Ruth Lewin "spent her days tending to her family, supporting her husband's (Charles Seliger www.charles-seliger.org) art career, and pursuing a wide variety of creative pursuits, but it was at nighttime after her children were asleep that she created her deeply personal art," says her granddaughter, Alison Seliger-Schamberg. (Courtesy Photo/Alison Seliger-Schamberg)



"When Robert and Mark were children, their family lived in a low-rise faux-Tudor apartment building in Mount Vernon, N.Y. From the outside, one would never know how much creativity, artistry, invention, thinking, reading, and exploration were going on. In their apartment, the pulse of creativity was ever present, like a cherished live-in relative," says Ruth Lewin's granddaughter, Alison Seliger-Schamberg. (Courtesy Photo/Alison Seliger-Schamberg)







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