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THE YAM PRESENTS *Matriarchs of Modernism and Modern Connections*

[Billings Montana]

Matriarchs of Modernism

July 16, 2020 – July 2021, Mildred Sandall Scott Galleries

Matriarchs of Modernism features works from the YAM's collection by four influential Montana artists, part of the museum-wide theme of "Women's Work" commemorating the centennial of women's suffrage. A companion exhibition, *Modern Connections*, highlights a few of the artists who were taught, influenced, or sustained by these early Modernists.

Jessie Wilber, Frances Senska, Gennie DeWeese, and Isabelle Johnson were among the first and most influential Montana artists to embrace Modernist art and values. They mentored students and connected other creatives working in the arts, sciences, and humanities to construct an alternative to the nostalgic cowboy culture of mid-Century Montana.

Beginning in the 1940s, these four *Matriarchs of Modernism* arrived in, or came home to, Montana after absorbing avant-garde philosophy and practice in urban centers. They, in turn, introduced new ways of thinking about art and teaching to succeeding generations of artists. Over their long careers, they each found ways to combine the formal lessons of abstract composition with personal vocabularies based on close observations of the people, places, and things in their daily lives. Their deep connections to place were consistently reflected in their subjects and in their support for Montana's creative communities.

Modernism was a global movement that aligned with the social upheavals brought on by the industrial revolution. Building on late nineteenth-century precedents, artists began reflecting on the realities, hopes, and fears they experienced in the modern world. From the early decades of the twentieth century through the 1960s, Modernist art encompassed a broad range of expressions while sharing a few underlying principles: rejection of traditional illusionistic styles and conservative values, formal experimentation and a tendency toward abstraction, and innovative materials and processes. Modernism was generally optimistic, driven by utopian ideals and a belief in linear progress.

Modern Connections

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Jessie Wilber, Frances Senska, Gennie DeWeese, and Isabelle Johnson grounded their creative practices in connections. Each taught formally for part of their careers and, informally, throughout their lives. They were among the first and most influential Montana artists to embrace Modernist art and values. They, along with their students and other creatives working in the arts, sciences, and humanities, constructed a vibrant arts culture in mid-century Montana.

These four influential women absorbed and passed along the philosophies and practices of their teachers. And, in turn, they taught their students to look and see. They mentored generations of artists and overcame intellectual and cultural isolation by creating community. Their students and peers are featured in this companion exhibition to *Matriarchs of Modernism*.

The educational lineage of the Montana matriarchs merged the Bauhaus philosophy and aesthetics of Maholy Nagy, Edith Heath, and Marguerite Wildenhain with the teachings of abstractionists Hans Hofmann and Wassily Kandinsky, and regionalist Otis Dozier. Each of the artists learned from Cezanne's example to depict perspective with color and to emphasize the flat surface of the picture plane.

Isabelle Johnson modeled the role of rancher-artist, mirrored by her friend Bill Stockton and students Edith Freeman, Ted Waddell, and Patrick Zentz. Frances Senska's interest in local clay encouraged Rudy Autio and Peter Voukos to transform the Archie Bray brickyard into a ceramics residency. Gennie DeWeese turned her home into a place for artists and intellectuals to interact, exchange ideas, and find mutual support. Jessie Wilber's gentle force carved new channels for creative possibilities in Montana.

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