

## A Feminine Perspective

**ARTIST:** Ella Gilmer Peacock (1905- ) Spring City, Utah

**TITLE:** *In Nephi* 1988

**MEDIA:** Oil on canvas

**SIZE:** 18" x 24"

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Ella Peacock lives in Spring City, Utah, a small community that is fast becoming known as an arts center. Spring City is the only area west of the Rockies that is a Historical District. Peacock and her husband moved there after visiting the town and being touched by the local landscape--Peacock says she was "thrilled" by the sagebrush--some of which she planted in their front yard. Although Peacock grew up in the luxuriantly wooded East and spent time at a summer home on the coast, it is to the dry, mountain desert country she is drawn to live and to paint tonalist landscapes in what is known as the "Dirty Thirties" style that although now out of favor, still perfectly suits her serene landscapes and simple scenes with rural buildings.

Peacock never uses photographs and does mostly plein-air paintings that retain that intuitive feel for subjects that is too often dissipated in studio works. She gives viewers a slice of life look and feel for a place that conveys volumes about the people who live in and love the areas, without ever depicting those people. Peacock is rarely completely satisfied with her work and buyers often find themselves told to come back after she has reworked an area of the painting she's not pleased with. Years after making the original painting she may return to the spot pictured to rework part of a piece. She says even if the area looks different, she can often recapture the feeling she had earlier and rework the painting to a level that's acceptable (even to her critical eye). Peacock's range of jobs in her early years taught her many skills. She still uses some of those skills to make simple frames for her pieces that echo the rough, simple beauty of her paintings. She has passed on this skill to Lee Udall Bennion (another of the Spring City artists) who now also makes her own frames that match the style of her strong paintings.

Ella turned 90 years old this year (1995) and no longer does much painting. [However, at last contact (summer '96), she was again working on some new paintings.] She keeps some of her older work--owned or promised to buyers or institutions--around her the way many people keep treasured objects or friends. Her house, like her work, is simple and spare and reflects her practical approach to life. Her one front room, now her studio, has two large shop lights with daylight-colored bulbs wired into position, their cords plugged into a socket screwed into the old chandelier bracket, looking like an electrician's worst nightmare. Around the border of the room runs an Egyptian-inspired frieze she painted years ago, and the best chair belongs to a large, orangey cat.

She wears a narrow, patterned scarf around her gray hair and comfortable clothes and makes telling remarks and dry jokes. She looks like her paintings--strong, molded lines delineating the unadorned beauty of Utah's dusty hills.

The following pages are an autobiography written by Ella Peacock. The writing has been edited only slightly in order to give readers the flavor of the original document, which portrays Peacock through style as well as content.

Ella Gilmer Peacock--I was born in Germantown, Philadelphia, in 1905. My father was a lawyer, and he became what he wanted, too--a corporation lawyer--he did not like or wish to practice criminal law. He was killed in an accident at the age of 40 while doing a favor for his brother, Henry Field Smyth. We were all out at the summer home in Lavallette, New Jersey. I was 13 at the time. He was taking my uncle to help his son Henry, who was having car trouble.

My mother's father, Leander W. Mennhall, was a Methodist minister--kind of an evangelist I guess. He was quite a lively person; a handful as a boy, so I hear. Once his mother punished him by taking his clothes away when he went swimming against orders. This did not matter to him; he went home without them. He was in 33 battles of the Civil War. He started as a drummer boy and became an adjutant lieutenant. He also did blacksmithing, said he shod all the kicking mules. Later he became a dentist because he could forge his own instruments. Then he became a minister- got his degree for that. I was very fond of him. He was an excellent swimmer, wanted to swim the Hellesfront--like Leander of old, but the ship's captain would not allow it. He travelled extensively. My grandmother, his wife, attended college as a girl. This was rare in those days. Shortly before my grandfather's death at nearly 91, he went to California to preach for Aimee Semple McPherson! I'll never know why.

His parents were David Mennhall and Abigail Rue Moore. His father died and his mother took the family from Indianapolis in a covered wagon. One time they were down to 10¢ and had a family conference as to how to use this. They decided on beans. His father David had co-signed a note for a friend and lost all of his money. They went to Iowa, where Abigail married again to a man named Isaac Phipps. My aunt Dobbie (Elizabeth Mennhall) took care of grandfather after grandmother died. She never married and was like a 2nd mother to me. I lived with her for 6 months when I was 5 yrs old. Mother was

having a baby, Father had a nervous breakdown, my brother or sister had pneumonia, and I had just poured water down the piano keys so they were glad to unload me for a while.

I had a double curvature of the spine. Could not stand school until the 2nd grade. We were all sent to Germantown Friends school (Quaker) because the public schools then were very bad. Friends school had a high scholastic standing. Most colleges accepted their graduates on certificate, no college entrance exams required. For several years my most unfortunate job was getting my back straightened. I went to a special gym in the city to do an exercise routine. School was of second importance, however, I made it somehow.

I loved my father and I think he was partial to me, maybe because I needed his regard more than the others. He called me "Bunting". Mary was Mary Shivies. I was shy and lacked confidence. My parents always wished I was more like Mary. Mary was given authority over me--I had tantrums a lot. She could hold me motionless, which only enraged me more. She has lately told me that she used to encourage these outbreaks, it was fun.

Our family were fine Christian people. Grandfather Trunhall ( I never knew the Smith ones), knew his Bible from front to back and used to disagree strongly with the ministers of the day. He could quote passages of the Bible which were in direct opposition to each other as written. We always had family prayer at his house. We also had prayers at home.

I guess I was a rebel, I remember hearing an interesting happening about cousin Georgie Short ( a woman). I believe she lived in New York. Buffalo Bill's Wild West show was coming to town and was badly in need of financial help. Cousin Georgie had plenty of what was needed and came to the rescue. She was repaid with a barrel containing the first gate receipts just as collected. Mostly silver as I have heard.

Our family had a cottage in Lavallette, New Jersey, a very small settlement. We had a sneak box (sail boat) which we sailed all over Barnegat Bay. The Willbur (chocolate) family--10 children--also spent their summers there. We used to join the yacht club sail boat races in their boat. We always took care of scraping and painting our boats and painting and repairing our cottages. In Germantown, we always had one maid, sometimes two, but not at the shore.

One week-end when my father was there, my uncle Billy --his Brother--asked him to take him up the coast to help his son Henry who was having trouble. My father said to mother then that he did not want to go, but of course he went. He was hit by a train at a crossing. My uncle was not hurt, but Father was pinned and the Ford caught fire. He died in the hospital later that day. This was August 3, 1919. Mother really had a terrible time being left with five children, the youngest a baby. There was plenty of money, no worries on that end. Mother tried after that to make up to my two younger sisters for not having a father. I think they were quite spoiled. I felt that she did not love me much, but I am sure that was only in my mind. I think I was not much help to her.

A few years later my mother lost the largest part of her money. This was before the great depression. The family business--Young Smyth Field was a wholesale import and export business located on Arch St. in Philadelphia. They had exported a large amount of goods to South America. Our government declared a moratorium, saying that South America did not have to pay its bills at that time! My father had been the lawyer for the firm. My uncle Calvin was Vice President and uncle Isaac was President. This put the firm in the hands of the receivers as more than a million dollars was owing, and maybe a lot more than that, I don't know. Anyway, the family lost out, and the largest part of mother's money was in the firm.

I had left Friends school to attend a private school in Chestnut Hill, Springside. Mother took me out of there the end of my 2nd year of high school and sent me to German Town High School. I hated that. I had had 3 years of Latin and 6 years of French at that time but could not keep up with high school at the 2nd year Latin level. They were all using "fonies" for translating, I found out later. I did not know what a "fonie" was. I was most happy to quit in the middle of my senior year and go to art school. One year in Baltimore-- then to the School of Design for 3 years in Philadelphia. Mother's good friend Mrs Ballinger, the wife of a successful architect, furnished me with what she called her "private" scholarship. I worked as a camp counselor teaching swimming, life saving, and canoeing in the summer to pay for my materials. My 3rd and 4th years in art school were on a senatorial scholarship. I won the sculpture prize on graduation.

(Back Track) In Lavallette I had quite an admiration for one of the Willburn boys, Donald. I was used to hearing a certain amount of fun being directed at my nose, which was much longer than necessary. Donald said if anyone had anything to say about my nose let them come to him! I thought he was wonderful to stand up for me.

Back at art school--my mother thought I should study music more (after about 10 years of music lessons). I tried at Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore and decided I still wanted art school.

Mother's friend Mrs. Ballinger had helped mother a lot. She financed the remodeling of some of our house in Germantown to make two apartments for renting. She wanted to help in other ways, but mother did not want to accept all of that.

One episode in art school days I forgot to mention. I had always wanted to "hop a freight train" like the hobos. In Baltimore I accomplished this. Not a very long ride, but a sample! On graduation from art school I won the sculpture prize. Sam Murray, a close associate of Thomas Eakins awarded this (our sculpture instructor). I had met a girl at school, Frances Watson, who specialized in animal illustration.

After graduation I took charge of organized play at Springside School, and also taught some clay modeling. Then Watson and I went into partnership on doing basement recreation rooms, mostly for the Jewish population in Philadelphia. During the depression of the 30's it was hard to get people to work for you. Everyone was happily being on welfare and preferred not to work. Watson knew all that was necessary about carpentry,

and she taught me, so that we were able to build to bars, cabinets, and line the walls, etc. The workers were mostly all on relief (welfare) and that was easier than working. One basement was the interior of a space ship (Flash Gordon style). Murals were views from the windows. Another was an adobe interior, and another, Mexican.

We then took on the remodeling of rooms for apartments for home owners. This is where I met Bill (My husband). He had been working during the depression at carpentry jobs and house painting. Plenty of work to do at not too high pay, but better than the dole! Bill had come to this country after W.W.I in which he served 4 1/2 years in the British Army. He enlisted at the age of 15 (lied about his age, of course.) Well, not too long after this Bill and I decided to be married. He was nearly 40 and I was 34.

When I finished art school I had the opportunity of spending an entire year in Florence, Italy. I was to live with a cousin who had married an Italian Count (Palavechino is as near as I can come to their name). I had met her and a daughter years earlier when they visited this country. I was very busy with a so-called career then, and I should have been tied up and made to go then. I certainly have regretted not taking this opportunity ever since. I could have furthered my education as well as seeing the world, which I have not been able to do since.

(Backtrack) In Lavallette, N.J. on the Barnegat Bay and the ocean front, we used to go crabbing in our said boat. If we were not wet on our arrival home we would jump over board. Could not come back dry! We also upset the boat (sneak box) more than once. My father would always bring meat with him when he came down because it was unavailable at the shore. Also, we got our milk every day at the R.R. station, the milk train. No facilities in those days for keeping things cold in Lavallette. We used to buy fish fresh caught at the fish pound at the edge of town. Ocean caught, of course, and we cleaned our own.

We all learned to swim at an early age. During north east storms we used to swim in the ocean and ride the big breakers in--sometimes with the benefit of a piece of board and sometime just us! Those were very good days. We had a bath tub with hand pump at the end. The same "plumbing" was in the kitchen. Our "White House" in the back yard served as the rest of our bath room.

Later, the town put in facilities so that we all could have plumbing. This did not make Lavallette any more attractive to us.

While teaching at Springside School I stayed at a farm in Bucks Co.--an illegal "still" during prohibition days. My friend Frances Watson was buying it and her mother was living there with her. This was during the depression days of the 30s. She got a job as supervisor of art in the public schools of Pleasantville, N.J. Had to stay there during the week so I stayed with her mother in the old stove house.

New Jersey then started paying their teachers with "scrip". No money available. Watson explained to the real estate agent. He told her that the owner would wait for the scrip to

be redeemable. All of a sudden he appeared at the farm, I was there, said he came to see about the rent. The real estate agent said we had best get Watson's valuable antiques and stuff moved out or he was going to claim them. This we did. While we were leaving we saw his (the owner's) racing gig being taken away as well as other items which he was supposed to have taken a long time before. It appeared later that these were stolen by someone. We were later arrested for the theft and for destruction of property.

We had had a large hole dug in the yard for a septic tank. There was no plumbing except a water line there. After a trial (they had me in jail overnight until bailed out the next A.M.) We were acquitted and our lawyer sued the owner for all expenses. Lots of fun--my "night in jail". Of course the parents of the school children did not want me teaching there any more. I was ready to quit that job anyway.

I had various and assorted jobs after art school - painted "hand painted" lamp shades for piece work, tried teaching--art leagues, and even in Eastern University in Philadelphia. Hated it and was a very poor teacher. Mrs. Paula Balano, an instructor at the School of Design had me working for her painting and waxing up, cementing, and firing stained-glass windows. She made windows for several churches in Philadelphia, Wilmington, Del., and did the designing for the chapel at Valley Forge, working for Nicola D'Asuzo (spelling?) at the time. She was the first woman to win the foreign scholarship from the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia.

Also, I worked for mural painter and illustrator George Harding. Then I got a bit side-tracked, took a short drafting course, and had numerous drafting jobs. Became a senior draftsman and engineering technician. I liked the work, but should have quit sooner and gone back to painting. I did pressure-vessel architectural, and electrical drafting. Designed and drew up changes to a warehouse for the purpose of manufacturing the Poseidon Missile Body. Worked on electrical diagram for the sea going "Voice of America". Was offered a job by Bell Laboratories to work on the communications satellite. Jewelry designing for J.E. Caldwell in Philadelphia, which was another job. Beautiful antique jewelry would be sent in by customers to have the stones reset in platinum settings, thus ruining the piece to my mind. (This was J.E. Caldwell Jewelers etc. Philadelphia.) George Harding was commissioned to oversee and do all the art work for the season (as far as I know it was all of it), but I'm not absolutely certain. I worked for him on this along with others, of course, while I was still in art school.

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## **SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**

### **A Feminine Perspective**

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### **SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**

#### **QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING**

**(History, Aesthetics, Criticism)**

What style of painting is this? Does it look like the artist spent lots of time in her studio looking at pictures or slides of the scene? Why or why not? Do you know anyone else who paints or has painted in a similar style? What kinds of colors has the artist used? What do you think the artist's greatest concern was when making the painting? (Capturing the look, feel, or idea of the place?) Why do you think the artist was interested in making a painting of this place? What makes a good subject for a painting? Why? How would you describe this painting? Do you like this painting?

#### **ACTIVITIES**

##### **1. Visual Arts-expressing**

**Objective:** The students will demonstrate an understanding of variety in subject matter by making a drawing or painting of an unusual subject.

Show *In Nephi* and discuss, using the questions from **QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING** about subject matter. Talk about what makes interesting subject matter. Assign the students to make a drawing or painting of something they would not have thought of as the subject of a painting, keeping in mind anything they have learned about good design. Show the class the finished drawings and talk about how interesting the subjects the students have discovered are.

##### **2. Visual Arts-perceiving**

**Objective:** The students will demonstrate an understanding of composition by manipulating and drawing an interesting scene.

Show *In Nephi*, and tell the students that Peacock often changes scenes somewhat to make the composition or design of the painting more pleasing or interesting. Discuss with the students why artists usually manipulate the scene. (Because they want to make good

paintings or drawings, not just to duplicate the scene.) For young children, you may need to show them what this means. If you are not comfortable making quick sketches on the blackboard, you can cut out items from magazines and have the students arrange and rearrange them. Another possible example is to arrange and rearrange a bunch of flowers or items to make a still life.

If you are planning art activities that teach and explore design and composition, this activity can be used as a culminating activity or as part of the process. Be careful to avoid telling the students certain ways to design their artworks. This kind of direction is what has given Ella Peacock a life-long distrust of art in public schools. She can still remember being told things like where to put the horizon line, and to put a border around each piece, as well as other specific directions. Talk about principles like proportion and then allow the students to explore and discover instead.

Have the students all make drawings of the same scene or of two or three scenes that can be observed from the school grounds. If going outside is not possible, you can do the same activity using a still life. The students can change up to a given number of items in the scenes--you decide by looking at the scene what number is appropriate. Then have the students plan out and draw the scenes, changing or eliminating several items, changing placement, etc, in order to make the scene more interesting, a better composition, or just to reflect their differing personalities and ideas.

Compare finished drawings to see how many different, interesting compositions are possible from one scene or still life.

**Extension:** Students can do the above activity, but each will make several quick sketches of the same scene, varying the composition for each sketch. After class discussion and critique, if appropriate, have the students pick their favorite drawing and make a painting of the chosen composition.

### **3. Geography or History**

**Objective:** The students will increase their understanding of geographical areas or of a specific time period by comparing that area or time with the depiction of rural Utah in the painting *In Nephi*.

Show the class *In Nephi* and ask the students what clues the picture gives to the climate, land forms, and industry of the area. Use this discussion as an introduction to a lesson on Utah or to another area in or out of the United States. The students should be familiar enough with areas similar to the pictured scene to arrive at some reasonably accurate conclusions. If your class is studying some area or time period of Utah, move now into a comparison by showing paintings, photographs, or by reading accounts of that time or area.

If your class is studying a different area, show paintings or photographs of that area and ask the students what they can conclude about life there. Have them briefly compare the two areas--number and type of trees, landforms, rainfall, population concentration, etc.

Many students may never have been out of the Mountain West and may not be familiar with the sweeping plains of the Midwest, the gentle rolling hills of the East, or the denseness of humid-area forests.

By choosing what questions you ask the students, you can focus the discussion on a single, narrow topic such as the climate of the North West, or you can make the discussion as broad as life in the 20th Century. Other images from the CD-ROM may also be useful in this activity.

#### **4. Geography**

**Objective:** The students will demonstrate an understanding of the land and natural resources used by people from the past, present, and future by identifying how key geographical elements are portrayed in the painting.

Show the class the image of *In Nephi*. Ask the students, Where could this painting not be set? Why? What can you identify in this picture that would help you to know where it is?

Lead the students in a discussion about their own home. Some questions you may ask are, What was there before their home was built? Who do they think were the first people to use that land? What was on the land to use? How was the land used before people were there? What could this land be used for in the future? Who will use it?

Display *In Nephi* and other similar landscape images from the CD-ROM. Have the students identify specific features in these pictures.

**Extension:** Students may bring pictures, artifacts, and writings they have of how the land around their home is or was used.

#### **5. Language Arts-writing/Self Esteem**

**Objective:** The students will demonstrate an understanding of autobiography and/or increased self-esteem by writing a short autobiography.

##### Part 1:

Show the class *In Nephi* and ask the students, Why would someone want to paint this? List the reasons mentioned. Guide the questioning to include occupation, treasure hunting, the geography of the area, and other things that reveal the artist's emotional ties to the painting. You could say, "The artist might have a special memory that inspired her to paint this picture. What do you think it could be?"

At this point, the teacher may want to read some excerpts from Peacock's autobiography, being sure to include at least one area where she says something critical about herself and the section that talks about wishing she had gone to Florence, Italy when she had the chance. Discuss Ella's feelings about herself with the children. She seems to have a realistic but positive image of herself; her only real regrets are that she didn't take the opportunity to study art in Italy and she wasn't more help to her mother after her father

died. If there is any information about *In Nephi* in the autobiography, share it with the students and discuss how it is the same or different from their ideas.

Part 2:

Present to the students a photo or piece of artwork to which the teacher has emotional ties. Explain that it is a piece of time that represents the teacher's autobiography. Share with the students something the teacher has written about the experience that was had with this piece of art or this photo.

Part 3:

Have the students brainstorm about what they could bring to represent a piece of time in their life (i.e. photo, piece of art, clay objects, toys, etc.)

Have the students write about that object and an event from their life that is tied to the object to begin or to add to their own autobiography.

Ask the students to write a short autobiography that includes at least one good thing they have done, one thing they wished they hadn't done or had done differently, and at least one thing they hope to do in the next few years. Ask the students to be realistic but positive, as Ella was. You may want to point out that Peacock is a good artist, but she never has had, nor is likely to have, world-wide fame, just as most people will never play major-league baseball, or be movie stars, or soloists with important orchestras, or presidents of big companies. Discuss with the students what a **successful** life is.

Then have the students write down three things they can do to help them achieve their desired goal. Have the students make a copy of their three steps and take it home. You may want to keep the students' autobiographies and mail them to the students in a few years. You may also want to make the activity more complex for older students and include the introduction of an autobiography you will study in class.

**Extension:** Have the students keep an ongoing journal, using it as a way to encourage writing and to practice language skills. Periodically have students who wish, share sections of their journals with the class.

**Variation:** Do the above activity but slant the writing to fit a particular focus in writing such as irony, comedy, tragedy, etc. Have the students use a real experience and write it ironically, tragically, etc., or write the same experience different ways. Share writings with the class and discuss.