

## A Feminine Perspective

**ARTIST:** Mabel Pearl Frazer (1887-1981) Salt Lake City, Utah

**TITLE:** *Sunrise, North Rim Grand Canyon* 1928

**MEDIA:** Oil on canvas

**SIZE:** 36" x 53"

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Mabel Pearl Frazer is described by Robert S. Olpin as a "mainstay on the University of Utah's Department of Art faculty from 1921 until 1953." Extremely versatile, her teaching responsibilities included no less than nine different subject areas including art history, textile design, sculpture, ceramics, serigraphy, design, painting, landscape painting, and human anatomy.

Frazer was born in West Jordan, Utah, on August 28, 1887, but her family soon moved to the small town of Beaver, Utah. The eldest of four children, she valued her education and strongly resented having to put off starting school so she could help with the housework when her younger sister Leha was born.

Mabel graduated with honors from what was then the Beaver branch of the Brigham Young Academy (later known as the Murdock Academy). A very independent personality, she became devoted to art at a very early age. Her sister described her this way: "Her religion and her art took precedence over everything else in her life, she couldn't be bothered with anyone or anything else."

Frazer had some early childhood experiences that encouraged her later exploration of many forms of art. Her grandfather was a rock mason, and Mabel made a "nuisance" of herself at the family's rock quarry. Her family also owned a printing office, and it was her responsibility to be the type setter. In addition, her father had a blacksmith shop, a carpentry shop, and what she called a "stone sawmill." Working in and being exposed to a variety of art-related jobs were rich experiences for Mabel, the budding artist.

After her graduation from the Academy, she boarded the stage that went to Milford and caught the train to take her to Salt Lake City to attend college. Edwin Evans was her first art professor. She idolized him, and he and his wife became her life-long friends.

Mabel Frazer graduated from the University of Utah in 1914. She took a teaching position at Lewis Junior High School in Ogden, just long enough to finance her life-long dream of studying in New York. She studied in New York at the Art Students League under Frank Vincent Drumond. He was so impressed by her that he asked her to teach some of his classes. While in New York, Mabel also took classes at the School of Industrial Art.

After returning to Utah in 1918, Frazer began teaching at the College of Southern Utah in Cedar City. She then returned to New York to study at the Beaux Arts Institute of Design. One day, while she was making a copy of Rembrandt's *Daughter in Law* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the President of the University of Utah, President Widtsoe, saw her working and invited her to join the art faculty.

Mabel Pearl Frazer joined the University of Utah art staff in 1920 and remained there until her retirement 33 years later. She held strong views which she passed on to her students: "An artist must have something to say. Art is just another language and the would-be painter should at least learn

the rudiments of the language, color, composition, drawing, etc." She was personally instrumental in expanding the art department to include many new disciplines. She handled many managerial duties but was not appointed to the rank of associate professor until three years before her retirement. At one time, one of her former students, who was not even a college graduate, was appointed over her and was made head of the art department. Frazer believed she was passed over for promotion because she was a woman.

Mabel Frazer has been described by some as "not prolific." When her estate was appraised in 1981, it included over 386 works, but most of those were unfinished oil paintings. Her early style was reminiscent of Birger Sandzen, although less fauvist (her colors were not as bright) and more impressionistic (see *Sunrise, North Rim Grand Canyon*, 1928). However, in 1930 she went to Europe, spending 14 months in Italy where she was influenced by her studies of the old masters and by various artists. However, she clung tenaciously to her own purpose, not allowing herself to be confused by her exposure to a wide array of styles and art. She returned from Europe ready to "resume the struggle with old problems from a new angle," and to be an "American artist."

Although she maintained that she did not belong to any school (A group of artists espousing a particular approach and philosophy), while in Europe, Frazer did change her style somewhat, her paintings becoming flatter, with more simplified, angular, and skewed shapes (see *Venice Canal*, 1930).

In an interview published in the November 1933 issue of the *Improvement Era* (an LDS magazine), she stated her ideology: "The vitality of art is life. All great art must have roots deep in a native soil. It can neither be borrowed nor lent. Things expressed without deep convictions can never be greatly convincing, rarely are they more than bits of superficial pettiness. That briefly, sums up my philosophy of art, and I try to live up to it."

Frazer showed her work in Utah, New York, Washington D.C., San Francisco, Portland, and Florence, Italy. While studying in Florence, two of her Utah paintings were exhibited in the Uffizi gallery. Among her last shows was a retrospective held in 1980; over 200 people attended to honor this Utah artist. She had a long and active artistic career until her death at age 94.

Information obtained from the following sources:

1. Biography written by the artist's sister; Madeline F. Waldis, collection of the Springville Museum of Art research library.
2. Utah Art, Swanson, Olpin, and Seifrit.
3. 100 Years of Utah Painting, James L. Haseltine.
4. Dictionary of Utah Art, Robert S. Olpin.
5. Improvement Era, Vol. 36, November 1933, p. 773, Salt Lake City, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

---

## SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

**ARTIST:** Mabel Pearl Frazer (1887-1981) Salt Lake City, Utah

**TITLE:** *Sunrise, North Rim Grand Canyon* 1928

**MEDIA:** Oil on canvas

**SIZE:** 36" x 53"

### QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING

(History, Aesthetics, Criticism)

**History--**Do you know any other artists who used color in a similar way to this painting? (Some Impressionists and Fauvists, including the Utah artists Birger Sandzen and Philip

Henry Barkdull. Although some people classify this period of Frazer's work as *Utah Fauve*, Vern Swanson, Springville Museum of Art director, says it's really 1920s Vivid Impressionism.) Show the Sandzen and Barkdull slides and ask the students how they think the pieces differ from Frazer's or are the same.

**Criticism--**What is your initial reaction to the work? Describe what you see. How do the colors make you feel? Are the colors in this painting realistic? The most dominant area of a painting is referred to as the focal point. What do you think is the focal point in this painting? Why? How does the artist lead your eye to the focal point? When complementary colors are placed next to each other they make each other appear brighter. (Complementary colors are directly across from each other on the color wheel.) How many pairs of complementary colors can you identify? What time of day do you think this was painted? Why? Do you like this painting? Why or why not?

**Aesthetics--**Do you think this painting looks like it was painted by a man or a woman? Is there a difference between paintings by men and women? If so, what is it? Who do you think make better artists, men or women? Why? Do you think Mabel Frazer was looking at the Grand Canyon when she painted this picture or do you think she painted it from memory in her studio? Why?

## ACTIVITIES

### 1. Visual Arts-expressing

**Objective:** The students will demonstrate an understanding of color by creating their own landscapes using bold, exaggerated color.

Show the class the image of *Sunrise, North Rim Grand Canyon* as well as *Moonrise in the Canyon* (Sandzen) and *Designed Landscape: Symphony in Color* (Barkdull), if desired. Use appropriate questions from **QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING** and discuss the artists' use of vivid colors. Ask the students about the effects of the bright, intense colors. Are these exaggerated colors or arbitrary color? (Arbitrary color bears no relationship to actual colors.) What kinds of emotions or moods do the colors used in the paintings evoke? How are the colors used to direct the movement of viewers' eyes within the paintings or to create focal points?

Assign the students to make their own paintings using vivid, exaggerated color. You may want to encourage students to experiment with complementary colors to intensify the effects of the colors. Remind the students to use the information from the discussion to help them plan their use of color to create movement and interest. Encourage the students to be creative and original with their choice of color (the sky does not always have to be blue and the grass green, Mabel Frazer's sky is green and yellow).

Possible choices for media are torn colored construction paper, crayon, or marker for the elementary grades and acrylics, watercolor, pastels, or oil paint for upper grades.

**Extensions:**

After finishing the above activity, have the students create three pictures using the same drawing but choosing different colors in each one. Then compare the mood, impact, emotion, etc. of each.

**For Advanced Art or Gifted and Talented Classes:**

The Impressionists introduced the concept of painting out in nature while you are looking at the real thing. This is called plein-air painting. Mabel Frazer was a great believer in this. She loved to go camping, often by herself. She would throw all of her painting things in the back of her car she named "Abe" (after Abraham Lincoln because it liberated her) and away she would go to do what she loved, painting. The painting titled *Sunrise, North Rim* may well have been painted on location.

Plan a plein-air painting trip. Point out that time of day, weather, location, temperature, etc. will all have an affect on the final painting.

**2. History-Utah History-Women in Utah Art History**

**Objective:** The students will demonstrate their understanding of the influence of women in Utah art by creating a time line of the artists' contributions.

Show the class the images by Utah women artists from this CD and talk briefly about the contributions of Utah women artists. Assign the students to research and find out who all the important Utah women artists are. Then divide up the names and do further research about each artist. BYU library is a possible source, as is Utah Art by Swanson, Olpin, and Seifrit, the SMA library, this CD, Dictionary of Utah Art -by Olpin, and the following information.

**Chronology of Utah Women Artists**

1860--Karl G. Maser organized the Salt Lake City school called The Deseret Lyceum, whose curriculum included practical drawing for boys and needlework for girls. The contribution here may be that girls were permitted to attend at all.

1864--Sarah Ann Burbage Long (referred to as Angie Cross Long by Robert S. Olpin) was an untrained painter who painted a group portrait titled *Brigham Young and His Friends*. This is a charming painting owned by The Church History and Art Museum. The painting includes Brigham Young and several other church authorities, including the artist's husband, John V. Long. This painting predated many other art efforts in the state.

1882--Marie Gorlinski went to Paris to study art. She was the first Utahn to do so; the first man to go was J. T. Harwood, who did not go until 1888.

1887--Harriet Richards and Alice Merrill, best friends, attended art classes taught by the young J. T. Harwood, who had just returned from studying in California. These two friends were serious art students and later became very influential in the Utah art scene.

1891--Harriet Richards traveled to Paris to marry James Taylor Harwood. While she was not formally enrolled in the academy, her husband continued as her teacher and shared with her the things he was learning. The still- life paintings she created during this time bear a strong resemblance to J. T. Harwood's painting *Preparations for Dinner*, the first Utah painting to be accepted to the French Salon.

1899--Mary Teasdel was the third woman to travel to Paris to study. By this time, female art students were becoming more common. To accommodate them the French academy set up "women only ateliers," but the women had to pay twice as much as the men and had to endure unbearable conditions. Mary did not have a father's support in her art career. "He felt it not only his duty to support his unmarried daughter but to see she did not pursue anything so unbecoming as a professional career." Teasdel made several trips to Paris, which included the experience of studying with Whistler. Mary Teasdel was the first Utah woman to be accepted to show in the French Salon. When she returned from Paris, she was appointed by Governor Wells to head the Utah Arts Institute.

1899--Alice Merrill Horn was instrumental in the passage of a bill by the Utah State legislature, which funded the Utah Art Institute. Its mandate was to hold exhibitions and to purchase work. Alice Merrill Horn also established the practice of Utah schools purchasing local artists' work, and for this reason, most of the state's finest work has remained in the state.

1900--Laura Rawlins Cauffman and Mary Jennings Farlow went with Teasdel to Paris and influenced many other women to follow. Lu Dean Christensen, Louise Richards, Rose Hartwell, and Myra Sawyer formed the nucleus of an important, effective group of committed Utah women in the arts.

1910--Minerva Teichert was the first woman to be called on an "Art Mission" to study in Chicago. When she returned, she painted the murals in the Manti Temple. She was a particularly ambitious painter, painting large, mural-type paintings of her Mormon heritage and her western lifestyle. She was a rancher herself and put some of her skills to use in an interesting way. She raised money for her art studies by putting on a roping act on the New York stage. She was a remarkable woman and lived life as both a painter and a rancher's wife, and she raised five children as well.

1914--Alice Merrill Horn wrote *Devotees and Their Shrines: A Handbook of Utah Art*.

1921--Alice Merrill Horn organized sales and exhibitions in the Tiffin Room in Z.C.M.I. and Hotel New House.

1921--Mabel Pearl Frazer joined the University of Utah Department of Art faculty. She was the only woman on an all-male art staff (Stewart, Dibble, and Gardner). She was instrumental in introducing many new disciplines to the curriculum: sculpture, ceramics, anatomy, printmaking, graphic design, and art history. She remained on the faculty for 33 years, yet was never given the status of full professor.

1930--Ruth Harwood, daughter of J.T. and Harriet Richards Harwood, became an independent business woman with her own greeting-card company. She was multi-talented, an award-winning poet and a wonderful art-deco printmaker. She also was a craftswoman who designed women's handbags etc.

1947--Glena Beesley established the Pioneer Craft House.

1947--Ruth Wolf Smith, a prominent Utah artist who experimented with cubism, collaborated with her husband Paul, also an artist, to form Smith Studios, a Salt Lake City art gallery.

1947--The Myra Grant Powell Gallery was established by Ogden City. Myra Grant Powell was a very prolific artist who experimented with non-objective art.

1959--The Berthe Eccles Community Art Center was founded in Ogden.

1966--Lee Deffebach introduced Pop Art to Utah.

1982--The Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Fine Arts was dedicated at Utah State University in Logan.

#### **Extension:**

Students can convert this time line into a visual time line and include corresponding events of the day. Example: invention of the car or television, World War I, and World War II, etc.

### **3. Language Arts--Writing**

**Objective:** Students will internalize historical events by recording a biographical history of a

family member or an elderly member of the community. Show the class the image of *Sunrise, North Rim* and tell or read some of the biographical information about Frazer to the class. Tell the class that most of the information about the life of Mabel Pearl Frazer was obtained by reading a biography about her life, written by her sister, Madeleine F. Waldis. The most vivid images of pioneer life also have been found in personal journals and diaries. The award-winning P.B.S. Documentary on the Civil War by Ken Burns was all taken from personal accounts written in journals, diaries and letters.

You may want to read some excerpts to the students to get them interested in the activity. One good possibility is Mary Goble Peay, who wrote about her experiences as a young teen who crossed the plains with her family.

Instruct your students on the significance of writing biographies and have them select a subject whose life has spanned an interesting period of time. Selecting a family member such as a grandparent can provide some interesting insight into the student's own heritage. Ask the students to contrast life styles then and now, for example: life without

T.V., computers, or possibly, inside plumbing. The students should include important accomplishments and contributions of the individuals studied. Have the students share one or two interesting incidents or insights gained from their research.

**Extension:**

The Foxfire books are an example of what can be done as an extension of this language arts lesson. They are published interviews written by junior-high and High School-age students in rural Tennessee. The books include pioneer crafts and skills that used to be part of everyday life in the backwoods, such as how to butcher and cure a pig, making charis, and what wild foods to gather for the winter.