

Artist Aimee Gorham's Rush of Symbolism

Barry N. Ball © 2004

Artist Aimee Spencer Gorham (1883-1973) must have felt like an alien when she reached Brooklyn, N.Y. in 1910, having traveled across the United States from Portland, Oregon to attend Pratt Art Institute. Foreign art never before seen in the United States was setting a new tone of change in the American scene. The “Ashcan School” was pushing realism, Albert Pinkham Ryder was advancing symbolist art, and other experimentation was on the immediate horizon. Gorham arrived in the middle of that explosive change. New York was a good place to start an art career.

Gorham had saved money from secretarial work for the president of Southern Pacific Railroad to pay for her Pratt education. Her father Charles H. Spencer, who also worked for the Southern Pacific, was probably unable to finance her art studies. No doubt she missed her family, which had moved to Portland from St. Paul, Minnesota in 1898. Her passion for art physically separated her from her mother Anna Elizabeth Spencer, her father, three sisters—Gene, Ivie and Donna—and brother Sidney. So firm and disciplined was Aimee’s resolve that she returned to Portland after only three years of studies, graduating from Pratt in 1913.



Gorham’s personal development lent itself to the demands of being an artist. After coming to Portland at age 15, attending high school at St. Helen’s Hall, an Episcopal school, gave her focus, discipline and urgency about her potential career in art. While art is often characterized as “spiritual,” Gorham was known as a spiritually disciplined artist whether teaching or creating her own art. The same year she returned from Pratt, she became a supervising art instructor in the Portland Public Schools. A student at Riverdale Elementary, where she taught five years, Cornelia Cerf remembers Gorham communicating to each of her students by the keen look on her face. Cerf was motivated by her visible excitement. Gorham also taught at Washington High School for three years. Doreen Plympton recalls her teaching workshops at the Portland Art Museum, though there are no records of her working as a regular teacher. She probably took additional classes there, as she was constantly educating herself to become a better artist.

Her own art exuded spirituality. Barbara Webber, wife of well-known architect Warren Webber, remembers that her eyes told her story. Barbara can still envision Gorham’s almond shaped eyes that never closed all the way. It was, as if Gorham held an ultimate vision behind her eyes, undetectable to anyone else, but showing through her artistic expressions. There was an

accompanying sense of restraint in her youthful high voice, a hesitancy to act immediately, and a proclivity to keep to herself while maintaining a sharpened sense of spiritual optimism.

Bryce Anderson, at the time 18 years old and now in his nineties, a gifted artist who worked with Gorham at Fuller Glass Company when she was in her thirties, remembers her as “prim” and introverted. Her grandson Gregory Spencer refers to an aura of mysticism about his grandmother

reinforced when she repeatedly reported seeing angels. Her Christocentric mysticism broadened as she aged. She joined the Unity Church in Portland and looked forward to Indian mystics who came to Portland's Reed College. Long before it was popular, she was committed to vegetarian foods. Her grandson Gregory notes her unwillingness to use sugar, making elixirs from honey and herbs, and her granddaughter Janet Carlson remembers her insistence on using soy instead of meat.

Most important, her art in marquetry and stained glass used symbolism reaching into the very depths of sacramental meaning: religiously and culturally

transcendent. One need only experience the wood panels at St. John's Episcopal Church in Milwaukie to acknowledge her religious visions. The angel Gabriel is dynamically portrayed on a 4' x 12' panel employing some 20 kinds of wood veneer; the Madonna is there in her somewhat attenuated form with the Christ Child; John of Patmos represents Gorham's venture into the apocalyptic future as the “Alpha and Omega.” A fourth panel—a 45"x 60" marquetry panel of *The Magi*—originally commissioned some 24 years previously for Trinity Episcopal Parish Hall, accompanies these three. Comparing Gorham's works, the viewer experiences both her spiritual consistency and developments in her artistic style. The pure focus on Christocentric symbolism may still be seen in the Children's Chapel of Trinity Episcopal Church, formatted into the panels across the front of the altar—essential symbols of sacramental faith inlaid into the wood paneling.

Her literal Christocentric visions in stained glass were original and penetrating, as can be viewed at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Northwest Portland. On the Epistle side, or right side of the nave in the back of St. Mark's, is her stained glass contribution of the Sacraments of Extreme Unction (dedicated to Hugh Montgomery), and one window of Holy Penance and Confirmation (dedicated to Robert Farrell), both consecrated on Christmas day, 1947. A composite of two priests—Father Simmonds and Rev. Kempton—two important figures in St.



Choir of Angels – Irvington Elementary



Mark's and Trinity Episcopal Churches at that time, portray of Gorham's priest of Extreme Unction. Arthur Spencer, long-time St. Mark's member who knew both priests, recognizes them both in the portrait's body language and physiognomy, an amazing identification that appears clear to him every time he views the window. In addition, consecrated at the same time, a window of Christ's head in the chapel of St. Mark's was commissioned by Mildred Whitehouse in memory of her husband M.H. Whitehead—Portland architect of many important buildings in downtown Portland. Symbolism of his membership in the Masonic orders and the American Institute of Architects accompanies Christ's head, mixing cultural and religious symbolism. Complementary color and a taste for profiles combining Byzantine and Renaissance modeling characterize the beauty of Gorham's vision in St. Mark's windows.

Gorham used related symbolism to signal existing human values—ideals implicit in successful community and world relationships. Her 1939 22' x 4' marquetry panel, which appeared at the New York World's Fair on the motif of the "Brotherhood of Man" (sometimes also called "International Cooperation") through the auspices of the WPA (Works Progress Administration, the federal art program of the 1930s), American Institute of Architects, and the Irvington School PTA, personifies labor, industry, and education. They approach two sides of a hieratic figure holding an olive branch and dove of peace, the "Coming Generation" being brought to the law of liberty and the law of love. These figures are infused with faith, hope, and charity, as specified in her tagging of I Corinthians 13. The figure to the left is "the kindness of man" and he is leading "Wickedness" to the spirit of Universal Brotherhood. This piece is still at Irvington Elementary.

At Alameda Elementary School she created three WPA panels that portray Native Americans peacefully interacting with pioneer settlers and cut word script: "...And we shall leave the next generation a world which because of our efforts has become a better place to live." At times Gorham's optimistic future visions align with optimistic cultural visions, while at other times her works offer more radical, Biblically apocalyptic or sacramentally religious visions.

An allegorical pair of large marquetry panels at the Oregon State University Forestry Center, originally commissioned through WPA and recently restored, portrays the spirit of trees and man's respect for nature. The trees' spirit overwhelms the infinitesimal beings of the men and deer below. The second panel pictures enormous mountains of sheer rock beveling into a hollowed out cove of fragile manmade buildings. The motif of spirit in nature had already been honored in her 1937 WPA work at Timberline Lodge of two marquetry panels: one of a mountain



Mountain Lions – Timberline Lodge

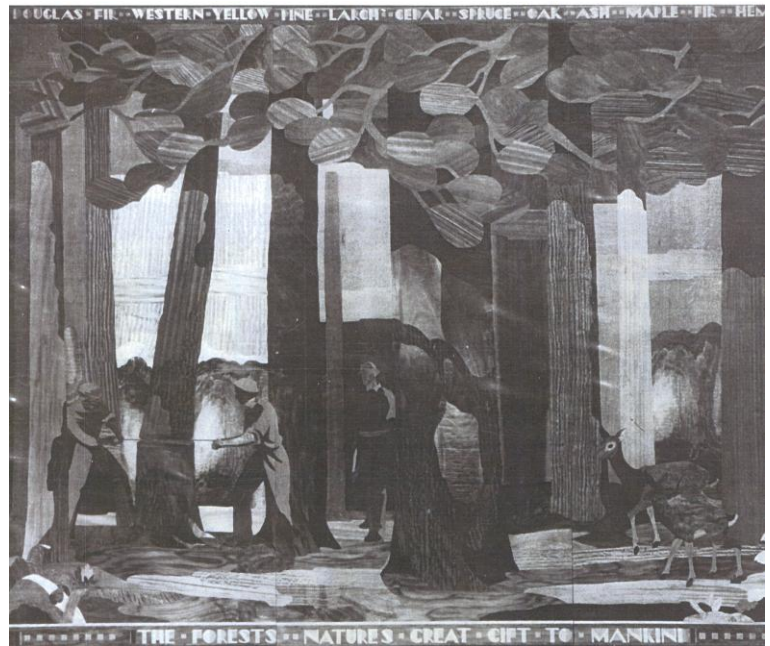
lion exulting in a twisting motion creates a synergy with another lion immediately behind; a second panel compliments it in a portrayal of two intertwined coyotes.

However in the Oregon State murals, there is a larger sense of proportion pictured between the immensity of nature's maternal spirit and man's place within that economy. Gorham's tagging *Only God Can Make a Tree* and *The Forests—Nature's Great Gift to Mankind*, direct the meaning of the panels, spawning and awakening a timeless respect for the surrounding spiritual power enveloping the viewer.

A tamer pastoral spirit appears in a post WWII marquetry piece in the U.S. Bank of Lakeview, Oregon, where nearly exact landscape and key local landmark references of importance appear in a large mural panel of 6' x 14'. Sheep meld with cityscapes; and an industrial logging scene fades into a horizon of deer, mountains, and trees. A commercial client tempers her ode to nature, but doesn't overwhelm it.

Gorham was a multi-media artist whose work in marquetry was her first love. When she attended Pratt, Arthur Wesley Dow was a major figure there. His far reaching career as both an innovative artist and one of America's greatest art educators, was inspired by the aesthetics of East Asian art as well as the Arts and Crafts movement championed by William Morris in England. He taught the appreciation of design elegance, based on nature, but never copying it. His teaching emphasized design and decorative arts, opening the door to many female artists who also wanted to teach art in community schools. Another emphasis at Pratt was architecture. Its new building in Brooklyn had recently been finished. All of these facets came to maturation in Gorham's career. She used her art in design, craft—as in marquetry and glass, and her teaching. Many of her closest male professional associates were Portland architects, who provided her support system. She was in the circle of Warren Webber, Harold Doty, and M.H. Whitehead, among others. During her lifetime she was the only woman to be selected an honorary member of the American Institute of Architects.

Gorham's life found congruence in her art. Her life as a fully committed artist intersected with her intimate family commitment. Her family life encompassed both joy and tragedy. Gorham's brother Sidney died as a young boy in a tragic knife incident. Her sister Ivie Spencer never married, and remained close to Gorham. They lived together at one point in NW Portland and shared an interest in food and recipes. Her sister Gene Spencer married Mr. George Herron, and it was through Mr. Herron that both Ivie and Gorham's daughter Betty were employed in a local supply and credit



firm. Her sister Donna Spencer married Harold Doty, a prominent Portland architect who became a creative colleague of Gorham. Both Donna and Harold Doty committed suicide in 1947.

In 1916, Gorham married Rollen Gorham, a man from southern Oregon rumored to be a farmer. Her two children—Elizabeth E. Gorham and Spencer Gorham—were products of this relationship. She divorced Rollen Gorham in 1921, and finished raising Betty and Spencer in Milwaukie, Oregon. It is remarkable that Aimee Gorham was not visibly bruised by these tragedies, and survived through the Great Depression supporting her family alongside a group of four widows, also raising their children on meager budgets. Gorham emerges as a strong female figure, competing with, while gaining the respect of, male artistic colleagues in Portland and surrounding areas. However, tragedy reinforced intimate family ties. Gorham was a competent and resilient artist surviving in the Portland art workplace as a divorcee, while continuing to be a tender and attentive mother to her family. As a businesswoman, she was almost inaccessible about her private life. As a mother, she was completely open.

Her 1921 divorce from Rollen Gorham left a portal for Gorham's father, Charles Spencer, to provide a father figure for her children and an ongoing support for her. Charles Spencer spent large amounts of time with Gorham's children, taking them on trips and nurturing them. Gorham candidly shared herself with her children. Both Betty and Spencer say they knew about her personal struggles as if they were their own. While neither child was pressured into becoming an artist, Gorham took them to the locations of her art projects, linking up her roles as mother and breadwinner. Gregory recalls a large mural that he was proudly taken to see at the U.S. National Bank on SW 6th and Stark. Its present whereabouts are unknown. According to Alice Willemse, the wife of a favorite Gorham employer Bert Willemse, Gorham's mother Anna Elizabeth was also very involved in caring for the children, especially when Gorham took further art classes at the University of Oregon and OSU. Aimee heard Dr. Eugene Steinhof of Vienna, associated with the U. of O., lecture at Portland Art Museum. She was determined to study under him, and making arrangements for the care of her children with her mother, she attended summer school. That resulted in a scholarship to study under him for three more years.

Gorham shared her art in unique ways. Her grandson Gregory recalls living across the street from her when she lived on NE



Panels – Oregon State University Forestry Center

33rd Ave. in Portland. He remembers the pencil portraits that she executed of him after inviting him in for hot chocolate. "They looked just like me," he states with a tone of warm remembrance.

Betty's daughter Janet Carlson claims that she was a Gorham favorite grandchild because of their mutual interest in art. Janet gives her grandmother credit for being her major inspiration for pursuing interior design and decorating in Portland. Janet apparently followed her grandmother around as a little girl, and can remember asking her innocently, "Grammy, why does your hand shake?"

She recalls following Gorham down a rickety, drafty old stairway in her house, only to find Gorham painting several canvases along its wall. She explained that this was the only place in the house that she could paint her series "*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*" for the Shriner's Hospital. She could move from stair to stair, working on several canvases at the same time. Carlson was then excited about the story, but now wonders if her grandmother had given Snow White some spiritual meaning. Even more, she was the "special artist" that Janet aspired to be when she grew up.

Born April 9, 1883, Gorham's career in art spanned some 60 years—from 1913 when she graduated from Pratt Art Institute until her death on Mercer Island, Washington, November 29, 1973. Few artists have been consistently creative for that length of time. Her work as an artist sustained both herself and her children. She did not compromise her art by working in other job settings.



During the Great Depression, the WPA was the primary support for Gorham and her family. In fact, the WPA opportunity actually ignited her experimentation into marquetry itself. After a book revealed an illustration of marquetry in England, she approached the principal of Irvington School with the idea of doing marquetry there. He equipped Gorham with a schoolroom in which to work. Four other cabinetmakers, also employed through WPA, joined her in the process. The project was the *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, a wall mural still in the downstairs corner classroom originally used as the library. The text built into this mural states: "Square thyself for use. A stone that will fit in the wall is not left in the way." She was fulfilling exactly what Francis O'Connor, in her book *WPA: Art for the Millions*, described as the very intent of the project: "...delight...in the excitement of being free to experiment with new materials and techniques..."(p. 16).

During the WPA period, Gorham did a large number of documented marquetry projects, actually starting in 1933 under the short-lived Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) when she demonstrated her sculptural skills with a bas relief of Abigail Scott Duniway, shown at the Portland Art Museum in 1934. She also did

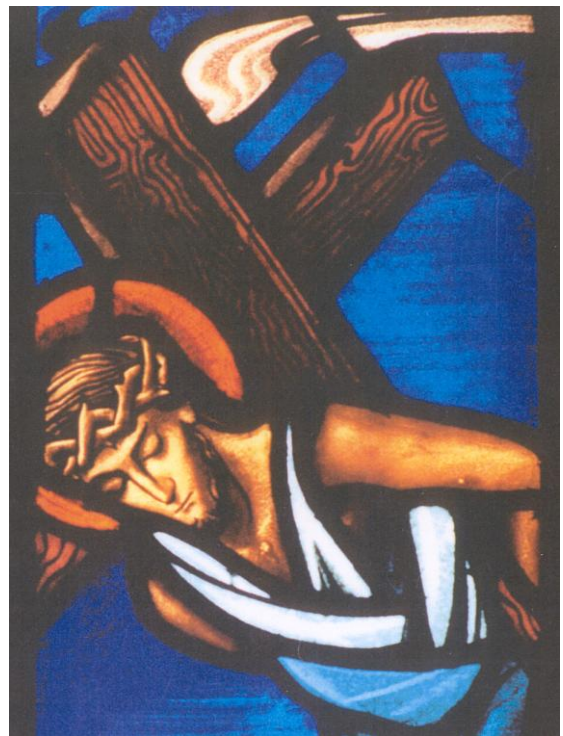


World Friendship – Riverdale School

watercolors of fairy tales and prints of civilian conservation camp scenes. She did two “spirit” marquetry panels as WPA projects in high school auditoriums—the *Spirit of Jefferson High School* and the *Spirit of Lincoln High School*, both presently unaccounted for. Work was done for Chapman, Riverdale, Gregory Heights, and Ainsworth schools, in addition to works already mentioned.

Gorham extended her work beyond WPA commissions, gradually gaining other employment. She worked for several glass companies. Early on, she worked for a glass company known as the Povey Brothers in the 1930s, until Fuller Glass Company took it over in the '40s. Fuller sold off the stained glass window portion of that company to Gorham's co-workers, Albert Gerlach and Bryce Anderson. Gorham then went to work for Bert Willemse in 1951. She worked in Willemse's glass shop in Burlington, Oregon, until the shop was moved to Scappoose, where she worked until the 1960s. Willemse and Gorham were close professional friends, taking correspondence courses together to enhance their art and sharing art as comrades and colleagues. This relationship was similar to her strong professional ties with male architects in Portland, but it was more personal.

Gorham's professional relationship with Bert Willemse was a vital link to her future, both personally and artistically. Born and educated in Holland, Willemse attended Amsterdam Art Institute. Willemse's direct involvement in protecting and creating art in Holland during the Nazi occupation held a great deal of interest for Aimee, according to Alice Willemse. At one time Willemse owned a stained glass piece by Rembrandt. Gorham respected



*Life of Christ – 3 panels on pages 7-9
St. John's Lutheran Church – Seattle*

the Dutch mastery of glass window art, and grew completely absorbed in the process herself through Willemse. Their relationship set up jobs in Seattle-area churches that still display her symbolic visions.



Trinity Lutheran Church on Mercer Island is decorated across its two-and-a-half story front with her gigantic glass flame in reds and yellows. At St. John's Lutheran Church on Phinney Ridge in Seattle, the life of Christ is articulated in brilliant portraits in colored glass on the sides of its nave. The beauty of these windows, highly reminiscent of paintings, expresses Bert Willemse's influence in Gorham's work. There is a softness in the contours of the flesh, and an abstractness in the modeling of the cylindrical volumes of the bodies. The features are simple and direct, yet communicate a deep intimacy with the viewer. Examples of Gorham's windows, unidentified to date, may yet be found scattered from Helena, Montana to sites across Washington State.

As Alice Willemse recalls, Aimee's designs directed much of Bert Willemse's work. He created the larger cartoons from her preliminary designs, though he too was a very skilled designer. However, Gorham frequently both designed and executed the projects.

Gorham projected a powerful human presence as well as a strong professional and spiritual one. While she was known to have a physical hand tremor, when her hand went down to the art surface, it became completely steady. Alice Willemse watched her in Bert's shop overcome the tremor with every stroke of art she executed, as did Joen Lockhoven, who also worked with Gorham. Both referred to this as a surprising phenomenon, as movements of almost two different people: the "before" person with the trembling hands, and the "after" person when hand and art tool connected with the working surface. Gorham's grandson Gregory, a professional medical technician, states that the condition was never formally diagnosed. It probably worsened in her seventies, so that it was possibly more visible.

In a very personal and important note that she wrote in her own hand about her spirit and life intent, there is a slight line variance: "I Can Do All Things Through HIM Who Strengthens Me." My Inner Spirit Knows the answers to all Problems. Within me is the Inherent Power of GENIUS, and the

*"I Can Do All Things
Through HIM Who
Strengthens Me."
My Inner Spirit Knows
the answers to all problems.*

Ability to use it to bring forth this new Art of Enamel to Astonishingly Beautiful Works. My Inner Spirit which is of Thee—Now brings me direct clear knowledge of – What to do – How to do it Quickly and Easily.” While the hand is slightly unsteady in the print, the resolve is firm. Her strong spirituality steadied her hand with her spirit winning over her body. It is that confidence which echoes throughout her personal history. She

was always known for facing new challenges, so that this was probably written when she was being taught enamels and working on an altar for Westminster Presbyterian Church, while learning to work with copper along with craftsman / technician Cliff Walker.

Gorham also worked for Pearson Glass, and finally for Lloyd's of Oregon, a McMinnville company owned by Lloyd Milligan, with offices in Portland. In her work with Lloyd's she formally engaged other craftsmen in executing her designs.

Gorham's work rhythm was taut and committed. Her discipline was quickened by always awakening early in the morning after having gone to bed by ten. She was recalled as “feisty” in her work, but somewhat quiet and timid personally, according to Joen Lockhoven, a coworker who followed, but briefly overlapped Gorham in 1964 at the Willemse shop in Scappoose. Alice Willemse recalls that one day Gorham left the shop in a rage, slamming her tools down on the worktable, in reaction to difficult patron who wanted “schlock.” This was a rare incidence of her impatience. Willemse, who allowed Gorham much personal space due to his deep respect for her, allowed her to take the rest of the day off. Janet Carlson recalls an incident at Gorham's home that reflects essentials shared by Gorham and Willemse. A vacuum salesman stepped through Gorham's front door, and offered to trade her a vacuum cleaner for a piece of her work. Gorham agreed and he walked out with art and she had a new vacuum cleaner. Bert Willemse had often talked to Gorham about the Dutch trading art for bartered items, a practice going back centuries.

My Inner Spirit which is
of Thee – now brings
me direct clear knowledge
- What to do
- How to do it
Quickly and Easily



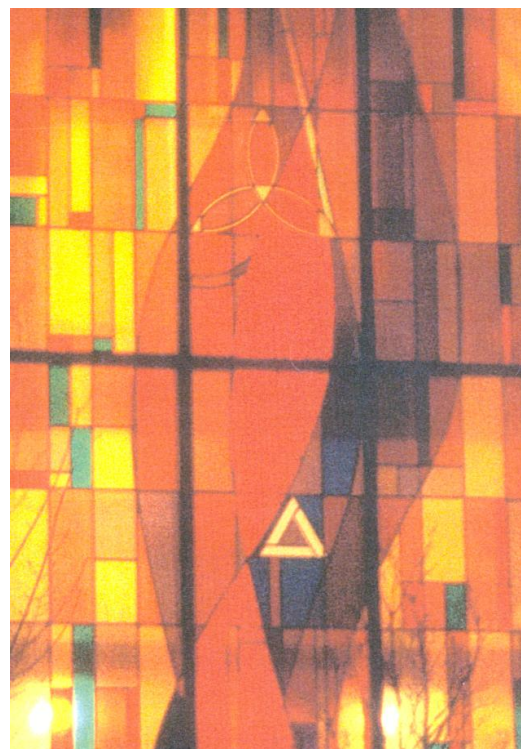
Gorham's art has a striking similarity to late Medieval and Proto-Renaissance art of the Italian fourteenth century trecento period. It's very reminiscent of the work of Ambrogio Lorenzetti in Siena, Italy. Aimee's allegorical work with tags of meanings, sometimes Medieval detail of towns and people, and even the stress on certain theological motifs that highlight faith, hope, and charity—correspond to abstract ideas that Ambrogio fastened to his art at the Palazzo Pubblico council chamber and the Sala dei Nove.

Further illustrating that parallel is a second WPA triptych series at OSU in Corvallis entitled *Wisdom*. Gorham constructed a huge *Tree of Life* in marquetry as a center panel with two side panels of figures moving toward the vision. The figures are symbolic rather than realistic, yet in certain cases these figures were designed to portrait leaders whose lives have been typical of their conspicuous service, such as Abigail Scott Duniway who carries a lantern of enlightened leadership. Large sections of tagging taken from the *Old Testament*, accompanies these panels. Likewise, the 1939 World's Fair panel's wording of "Faith, Hope, and Charity" parallels Ambrogio's work in the great allegorical fresco mural *Maesta*, in the Palazzo Pubblico, Massa Martina, with those virtues personified on ascending stairs. Gorham's taste for personifications was, as with Ambrogio, an appeal to intelligent abstraction.

Realities nonetheless separate Gorham from the parallels with Ambrogio. It is unlikely that Gorham traveled to Italy during her lifetime, according to her daughter Betty. At the time of her initial education, art history was less emphasized in the United States. Yet Gorham had somehow absorbed the Renaissance as well as 20th century abstraction, developing her own traditional artistic style, while including additional influences. It is possible that she did gain some knowledge of Ambrogio's work in her continuing art education after graduating from Pratt.

More likely, the modern Symbolist movement influenced her deeply, especially the work of Maurice Denis, Pierre Puvis Chavannes, and Emile Bernard. In Maurice Denis' *Way to Calvary*, although there are standard Christian elements, one cannot fail to miss an Eastern version of the Cross, or "X," thereby mixing Eastern and Western forms of religion. Mary Anne Stevens, in her book *Emile Bernard 1868-1941* states, "Symbolism led art back to the very reason for her existence: the expression of the ideal, the unreal. It reminded art of her origins and re-instated mysticism as the inspirer of the super-real." Bernard added, "I was an atheist in Brittany, and Brittany made me a saint."

As Stevens astutely observes, of the two major axes



Flame of the Spirit – Detail
Trinity Lutheran Church – Mercer Island

of Symbolism—mysticism and the idea—it was the ambiguity of the “idea” that caused a crisis of confidence among the proponents. Should there be a return to nature, a focus on human depression and decadency, decorative abstracts, or on the Absolute of God? Gorham believed that art begins with inner revelation. Spiritual concerns emerged throughout her artistic career, influenced in part by her studies with Dr. Steinhof. This aspect of Gorham’s work is pursued in more depth in a separate paper.

Marquetry has had its own long and illustrious history since Egyptian and Roman times. It especially had a lively history during the 15th and 16th centuries. Gorham’s marquetry develops its beauty in the blends of color and variations of grains used, as the color and grain fuse within the eye of the viewer. Consequently, it is almost impossible to capture these affects in photographs of her work. One must experience her work directly. Using inlaid woods of differing grains and colors to



Dryad – Gregory Heights Elementary

achieve varying affects of form and emotion was, in Gorham’s initial experience developing the technique at Irvington School, life defining. Gorham maintained a group of experts in woodworking who were fellow WPA artists. There was a constant consultation and interchange process between those knowledgeable about woods and Gorham, in her desire to create an effective pictorial. Especially in her later career, she worked in a group much like a medieval shop artist. She did the designs, but supervised others in assembling larger pieces.

Furthermore, her art reflected not only her unique designs, but was also the originality of her production techniques. She developed her own methods of crafting the marquetry. Gorham followed a predictable process of first sketching an idea and transposing it into a cartoon—a preliminary drawing of the actual size. Gorham felt it was important to do this with music playing, believing that music had a direct inspirational relationship to the drawing. She

most liked to work with Tchaikovsky’s *Fifth Symphony* playing. Sometimes it was Beethoven, in the same way the Symbolists listened to Wagner while executing their art. As the music continued, she broke the cartoon down into envisioned colors, and then matched them to veneers of appropriate grains. At times she was seeking an emotional affect. At others, she simply sought a physical reproduction. She used an average of 20-27 different types of wood on each of her panels.

Cooperative decisions with her furniture makers and wood experts about the reaction of the wood to the stress of the mural no doubt helped Gorham in developing each step in the process. She preferred working with veneers no more than 1/20" thick. She cut the woods, according to a yet undisclosed secret process, into their respective segments, fit them together, scotch taped them while gluing them on the backside, and then applied some five tons of pressure for 24 hours until the glue was set. After a drying process, the tape was removed, and a hard steel scraper was applied in the same direction as the grains. Fine sandpaper and the finest steel wool were then rubbed carefully across the surfaces. Following that process, a filler of Nitrokote lacquer was applied and a specially developed rez, known only to Gorham, was employed to seal the woods. After drying, the surface was lightly sanded and twenty coats of wax were caressed into the woods—again this was a special secret formula water-white in color.

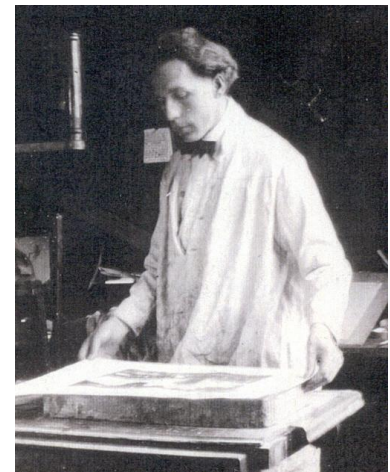
Gorham's glasswork at St. Mark's, Trinity Lutheran Church, and other churches, required different sensitivities and techniques. Her technique with stained glass represents the maturing of her exposure to Renaissance and 20th century art, with perhaps medieval influences as well. She seems to have followed a traditional stained glass production process, and had no secret techniques. Gorham specifically left behind a two-page outline of this process contemporary with her work in Washington state. This included design work toward approval, then a cartoon the full size of the window, followed by a cutline process resulting in the actual cutting of the glass. The work required up to three firings, and use of pigments to establish highlights and for light and shade effects.

Michael Munk's Summer 2000 *Oregon Historical Quarterly* article entitled "The Portland Period of Artist Carl Walters," provides an intriguing lifestyle contrast for two artists of the same era. Carl Walters was born in 1883, the same year as Aimee

Spencer Gorham was born in St. Paul, Minnesota. Carl briefly touched down in Minneapolis, where he attended the Art Institute. Walters was studying

painting in Greenwich Village at William Merritt Chase's New York School of Art, at the same time Gorham attended Pratt in 1910. Walters studied the realism of the Ashcan School, which specialized in working-class scenes. From this, Walters became committed to a Bohemian life style. His Portland art included scenes of circuses and especially shipyards, much like the Runquist brothers later painted in Portland after their work with the WPA. Such working class painting, Munk asserts, had a revolutionary undercurrent. While in Portland, both Aimee

Carl Walters in his studio – R



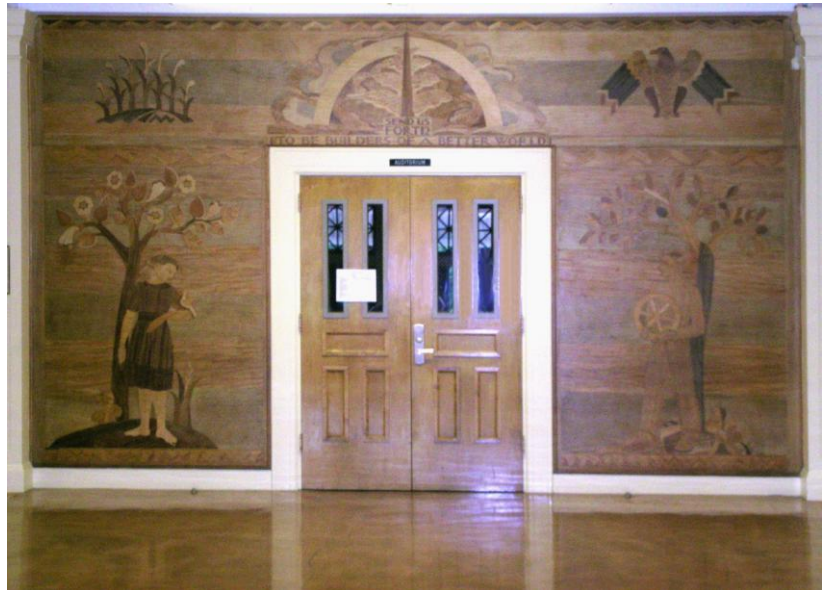
L – Aimee doing the bas relief of Abigail Scott Duniway



Gorham and Carl Walters had art shown at the Portland Art Museum. Neither followed European models of art, and each in their own way, attempted to develop an “American art.” Yet two divergent life styles produced art from seemingly different forces: one radically individualistic and one spiritually traditional.

Gorham probably never knew Carl Walters, even though she was perhaps aware of his art. Gorham traveled in different social circles. Walters’ high individualism could be contrasted with more community based art production of Gorham. Her attraction was not to the high-risk experimental art that Carl was drawn to do. She developed patrons and preset commissions while Walters primarily looked to sell art on the open market. She was not perceived as a “political radical” but rather associated with the Portland mainstream. Her individual visions aligned themselves to the majority values of society. Both produced dynamic art, but each marched to a different drummer. Both were part of the fabric of Portland’s history—a history about which we can all feel pride.

Janet Carlson remembers mostly, that her grandmother “always wore a suit,” and seemed to be a “class act.” Gorham moved with a dignity and solidity that could be seen in many articles in the *Oregonian* from the time she was young until she was older. No matter her age when the photo was taken and published, she was a picture of dignity to the reader. Her art continues to hold out that dignity, because Gorham’s art is Gorham personified.



Send Us Forth – Chapman School

What would Aimee think of today’s marquetry world? In September and October 2002, Mount Hood Community College offered a showing of the members of the Columbia River Chapter of the American Marquetrarian, Inc. The art exhibited focused on realistic and pop art subjects, all in beautiful woods. Unfortunately, none of the officers the organization interviewed had heard of Aimee Gorham, though Leo Nirme and George Mosley feel a need for a history of marquetry. No archive has been developed for this medium, so today marquetry is considered an individual-by-individual expression.

Aimee’s forms were quite different from those being attempted today, and her content and allegorical symbolic style has probably never been duplicated in marquetry anywhere. **If she were still doing her marquetry today, her works would encourage everyone to dig deeper into their spiritual reservoirs.**

References and Resources Used

Allen, Ginny and Judy Klevit. *Oregon Painters* (Portland: OHS Press, 1999)
 Appleton, Marion ed. *Who's Who in Northwest Art* (Seattle: Frank McCafferty, 1941)
 Bloxom, Margarite. *Pickaxe and Pencil: References for the Study of the WPA*.
 (Washington: Library of Congress, 1982)
 Griffin, Rachel and Sarah Munro. *Timberline Lodge* (Friends of Timberline Lodge, 1978)
 Hefues, Loretta. *The WPA Historical Record Survey* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1980)
 O'Connor, Francis. *WPA: Art for the Millions* (Boston: New York Graphic Society)
 Sharylen, Maria. *Artists of the Pacific Northwest* (London: McFarland and Company, 1993)
 Stevens, Mary Anne. *Emile Bernard 1868-1941* (Netherlands: Waanders Publishers, N.D.)
News-Register (McMinnville, Oregon), 07-29-1962, 08-08-1962.
 Munk, Michael "The 'Portland Period' of Artist Carl Walters," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*.
 Summer/2000.
Oregon Journal 03-10-1939, 06-13-1939, 12-06-1947, Sunday, 03-21-1948
Oregonian 06-03-1934, 03-20-1941, 03-26-1941, 06-02-1963, 06-03-1939, 09-13-1964, 12-09-1974.
 Stanton, Glen. "Current Notes from Architects of Portland,
 Oregon." (N.D.) *Architect and Engineer*, 05-39 (p. 34)

Oregon Historical Society records personnel
 Portland and Seattle Public Libraries
 Arthur Spencer, research expert and advisor
 Interviews: Albert Gerlach family, Bryce Anderson,
 Alice Willemse, Joen Lockhoven

**Aimee Gorham
 in her late 80s**



Gorham family: A vibrant Gorham family carries forward Aimee's heritage. Aimee's son, Spencer Gorham lives in Forest Grove, Oregon with his wife Maxine Gorham. Aimee's grandchildren by Spencer are: Gregory Spencer, Santa Clara, California; Spencer Gorham, Jr., East Portland; Eric Gorham, Portland; and Michael Gorham, Salem, Oregon. Aimee's daughter Elizabeth Pelton lives in Seattle. Aimee's grandchildren by Elizabeth are: Janet Carlson, Portland; and Bruce Pelton, Seattle, Washington. Two grandchildren, David Pelton and Marc Gorham, a twin of Eric, killed in Viet Nam, are deceased.



This project, initially suggested by David Milholland of OCHC, was conducted in consultation with Portland State University Professor of Art History Jane Kristof.

Contact: Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission
PO Box 3588 Portland, OR 97208
info@ochcom.org
www.ochcom.org

Images used courtesy of:
Barry N. Ball, David Milholland,
Ginny & Bill Allen, and
Gorham family members