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Marion Pike

(American, 1913-1998)

Socializing with the rich and famous in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Paris, and other hubs of culture easily could lead a person to a sense of entitlement and personal extravagance. So it is especially noteworthy that Marion Pike maintained an unaffected, independent spirit driven by a personal pursuit: depicting through brushstrokes the essence of people, places, and flowers. Among her portraits are those of Coco Chanel, Dolores Hope, Bob Hope, Alberto Giacometti, Zubin Mehta (for the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles), Norton Simon, and other individuals of renown.

"She would appreciate every chateau in France and beautiful apartment in New York. But it is not personally how she chose to live," says her son, John Pike Jr. "She lived in great simplicity. She had a house in Guatemala [where she wintered] that didn't have a phone or television." John further recalls the activity that kept his mother from being a reclusive artist and enthralled him as a child. "Every day when I went to school, I couldn't wait to get home to see who was going to be there. Every night a group of people would come for cocktails. "Mother was completely absorbed by painting," John continues. "She loved to go out to dinner and then come home and start a portrait."

Born into a family of means, Marion first visited the Louvre at the age of 12. But it was in 1956 that she made a sojourn to the museum on her own for a very specific reason. As she related the story to Merv Griffin while appearing on his television show in the mid-'80s, the trip to France followed a successful solo show in San Francisco's Palace of the Legion of Honor. "I thought, 'Everybody has lost their minds,' because [the work in the show] really wasn't that good," she said with her customary humility. "So I decided I better go to Paris and I better paint in the Louvre, because I read all the books how the old masters studied. And off I went." She spent days copying the self-portrait of Rembrandt, whom John says was the painter who most inspired her. Perhaps the experience explains why she painted 10 portraits of herself.

At Stanford, Marion set university records in women's golf and graduated with honors in Asian history. She laughed when she told Merv Griffin that the only C she got was in art. It was after college that Marion decided to become an artist. Consumed by faces, her portraiture in particular reflects a signature style that she called "big heads." In 1966, Time magazine commissioned Marion to paint a portrait of Ronald Reagan for a cover story on his run for California's governorship. The 6-by-3-foot painting hangs in the Smithsonian's National Gallery. "They really became friends," John says of his mother and her subject. "[When Reagan was president], he was always asking her to state dinners. Once she found herself sitting between Reagan and [French President François] Mitterrand."

Marion also formed a great bond with Dolores and Bob Hope. Frank Lloyd Wright, whom she sketched in 1948 at Taliesin West, especially appreciated her 1947 portrait of Dolores. Measuring 15 by 9 feet, Marion's largest painting is one of several portraits she painted of her dear friend Coco Chanel, with whom she dined nightly while in Paris. Paintings of the fashion icon stand out as rare occasions when Marion painted a full body.

"There was never an ego about what she could paint," John says. "She was always trying to learn. She had a great weakness for art books, especially books about Renaissance art. When she went to bed each night, she would read an art book." But books were just one form of education for Marion. "Every time you paint somebody, you grow — because you learn a whole new world," she said. She felt similarly about painting floral still lifes. When Aldous Huxley suggested she try LSD, she replied, "I have been looking at the soul of a flower for two days, so I don't need anything else." According to John, Gerald

Van der Kemp, who oversaw the late 1970s restoration of Claude Monet's Giverny gardens, "thought mother really had genius and allowed her to come and paint in the garden where Monet painted his water lilies.

Hanging on a mirrored wall in John's parlor so that it appears to float is a 47 ¼-by 47 ¼-inch painting of Mont Blanc that reveals his mother's ability to look into the spirit of a place. Among her landscapes are multiple scenes of Notre-Dame, the Pont-Neuf bridge, and Venice. During summers spent at Claudette Colbert's house in Barbados, she concentrated on clouds.

The vibrancy of Marion's energy resonates today in the work she left behind. Perhaps she said it best herself: "Art is of no age. Art is of no time. If it's art, it is going to live."



Portrait of Bob Hope



Portrait of Coco Chanel