MARION COFFEY THE ART OF COLOR

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Curated by Laurie Winters with an essay by Terry Ann R. Neff

MUSEUM OF WISCONSIN ART













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FOREWORD

Every now and then museums present an exhibition that seems at first blush to defy the contemporary moment. *Marion Coffey: The Art of Color* is just such an exhibition. Over seven decades, Marion Coffey pursued the arts, first as a commercial illustrator in a powerhouse Chicago advertising firm and then from the mid-1950s forward as a painter who privately and passionately captured the simple joys and beauty of living. Although represented by the Tory Folliard Gallery in Milwaukee for more than twenty years, no museum has ever exhibited her work, let alone organized a retrospective of her career, until now.

Coffey worked quietly and persistently—never clamoring for attention or expecting anything more than the pleasure she garnered from the act of painting. A colorful, effervescent delight pervades her work. Today, after two dark years of a global pandemic, *Marion Coffey: The Art of Color* is an exhibition that is made for the moment. As both the museum's director and the exhibition's curator, I have appreciated not only Coffey's confident and optimistic paintings, but her steadfast commitment to a life in art. Her work and life are an inspiration.

This project would not have been possible without a number of individuals who generously gave of their time and talent. Our greatest debt is to the family of Marion Coffey who enthusiastically agreed to the idea. Her children, Lisa Coffey Robbins and Peter Coffey, deserve special gratitude for their assistance in preparing the exhibition and for lending so many works from their private collections. A heartfelt note of thanks goes to Coffey Robbins, whose dedication to preserving her mother's work ultimately made the exhibition possible. We are also deeply grateful to the private collectors who graciously lent their cherished artworks. Thanks also go to Tory Folliard, whose long relationship with the artist provided context and perspective.

A deep debt of appreciation is owed to Terry Ann R. Neff, whose essay for the exhibition catalogue compellingly articulates Coffey's life and work. Neff also edited the book and consulted on the project from its inception. Thanks also to arts writer Peggy Sue Dunigan, who a decade earlier had prepared a short essay on the artist for a book. Although her project was never realized, her efforts paved the way for MOWA's exhibition catalogue.

A special word of gratitude goes out to MOWA's many staff members whose hard work helped bring this project to fruition. Andrew Nordquist produced a bold and colorful design for the exhibition and catalogue that underscores the spirit of Coffey's work. Other staff members who have contributed in various ways include Ann Marie Craig, Anwar Floyd-Pruitt, Courtney Hinder, Graeme Reid, Jennifer Turner, Andrea Waala, and Heidi Wirth.

For making this exhibition possible, we sincerely thank Presenting Sponsor, the Hauske Family Foundation. Major support was also generously provided by Karen Blommer, Elaine Burke, Steve and Peg Rolfs, and Baird, as well as the museum's annual exhibition supporters James and Karen Hyde and Pick Heaters. These sponsors have helped us to share the inspirational work and story of Marion Coffey.

Laurie Winters

The James and Karen Hyde Executive Director | Museum of Wisconsin Art



THE ART OF COLOR

Terry Ann R. Neff

The paintings of Wisconsin artist Marion Coffey (1924–2011, née Kunzelmann) afford the viewer as much pleasure as the artist had in creating them. The only child of a successful single mother, she began drawing at an early age.¹ When she was twelve, Coffey and her mother, Mary Kunzelmann, moved from Milwaukee to Chicago. The pastime developed into a passion that Coffey pursued professionally, studying at the American Academy of Art, Chicago, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Ecoles d'Art Américaines de Fontainebleau in France.

Coffey took a job in the mid-1940s as a commercial illustrator for the Steven Gross advertising firm on Michigan Avenue in Chicago. Among the company's clients were Coca-Cola, Coppertone Sun Tan Lotions, and RCA (Recording Company of America). At the time, Coffey was one of the first women employed as a commercial artist in the country. In her illustrations from the 1940s, she drew on the times themselves. The works are figurative and anecdotal (pl. 2). She used her own likeness when appropriate—and what could have been more appropriate for the pioneering commercial artist than a tribute to capable women supporting the war effort (pl. 1). She even landed the covers for the *Holiday Issue*, *Chicago Sunday Tribune* (pls. 3 and 4) and the *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, *Magazine of Books* (pls. 5 and 6).

After she returned from Fontainebleau, in around 1950 or the following year, Coffey moved to West Bend, Wisconsin, to live with her mother, Mary Kunzelmann, who had recently married Robert H. Rolfs, a businessman prominent in the leather industry. Coffey began working as an illustrator for the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. She met John Louis "Jack" Coffey, and the two wed in 1952. They were married for sixty years and had two children, Peter and Lisa, and numerous grandchildren. Judge Jack Coffey's distinguished career culminated with his appointment to the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit. Coffey pursued her own successful career. She continued for several years at the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, then abandoned commercial art in favor of fine art to show things "not exactly how they may look, but as I see them." And what she saw turned out to be a wealth of shapes, brilliant colors, and a vision that transformed what she observed into what she felt. In her studies and on her travels, she absorbed the transformative influences of modern European art from the French Impressionists and Post-Impressionists to the Fauves and German Expressionists, Gabriele Münter (1877–1962) in particular (pls. 13, 15, and 16). Closer to home was the collection of works by American painter Milton Avery (1885–1965) at the Milwaukee Art Museum. Like Avery, Coffey developed her own blend of abstraction and representation based on a process of eliminating details and simplifying forms so that her compositions were constructed chiefly through color moving across the paper or canvas as well as creating a sense of space (pl. 14).

When Coffey committed herself fully to fine art, she tried her hand at *plein-air* painting, finding inspiration in the gardens and barns of Wisconsin (figs. 1 and 2) and even the local train station (fig. 3). In her works from the 1970s, she practiced a vivid realism that conveys a sense of immediacy. Her active brushstrokes



Fig 1 Octagon Barn with Field of Blooming Flax, Grafton (Farmer Behren's), c. 1975. Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in. Courtesy of the family of Marion Coffey

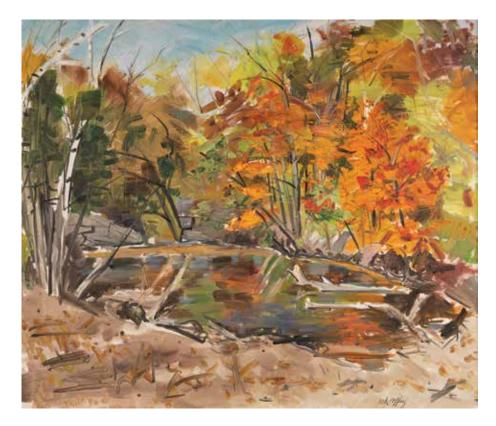


Fig 2 *Fairy Chasm, Secluded Ravine*, c. 1975–78. Oil on canvas, 36 x 42 in. Courtesy of Prudence Pick Hway

transfer her keen observations into a memorable experience of place. Her palette is realistic, rich, but does not exhibit anything beyond what nature can offer. Although she later ranged far afield, she never lost interest in Wisconsin subjects (pls. 32 and 33).

One of the greatest achievements of Fauve painters such as Henri Matisse was the divorcing of color from any requirement to be objectively accurate. Instead, the artist was freed up to express purely formal concerns or employ color to convey emotion. This attitude was fundamental to the German Expressionists: even in works such as a portrait that retain likeness and explicit content, color was used to express rather than to record, and the results were powerful. Painting became increasingly about painting and held as much information about the artist as about the subject.

For Coffey, a considerable breakthrough came in the 1980s. Her works display a marked change, now stripped of all vestiges of illustration or anecdote. Painting truly became a way to express herself: what she saw, what she felt, what she wanted to share. Her work now and going forward is all about magnificent primary color and her ability to harness it in scenes that are filled with energy and optimism (pls. 7, 9, and 29). Whether in domestic still lifes and interiors or grand,

sweeping landscapes and harbors, the jewellike, vibrating hues of bold, startling blues and reds and yellows themselves construct the compositions. Interestingly, she painted many of her works in acrylic on what she called "elephant paper"— St. Armand Handmade Paper, a heavily textured, deckle-edge sheet that she discovered in Montreal and was able to obtain in sizes comparable to working on canvas. She found she could layer her acrylic paints onto the paper and achieve results as sumptuous as those she achieved in oil painting (pl. 38). Interestingly, she tore her paper to the desired size, thereby preserving the roughness and spontaneity of its edges. Certain themes prevailed: harbors and villages, and, above all, flowers (pl. 36). After September 11, 2001, she even painted a series of flags (pl. 23). The flags display a visceral human empathy: composed of painted torn canvas strips, they suggest the destruction war leaves behind. Finally—literally—Coffey also captured the special space of her studio (pl. 39). She was working on it the day she died—an artist to the end.

Coffey achieved a rare balance. She managed to devote herself simultaneously to her family and to maintaining a professional life. She exhibited her work locally and was an active member of the League of Milwaukee artists. She participated in their exhibition at the Charles Allis Museum in 1981. The following year, Coffey had a show at David Barnett Gallery, Milwaukee, and the association was ongoing. But Coffey's most important professional relationship was with Tory Folliard, who first showed her work in 1991. That marked the beginning of a twenty-year friendship and collaboration.

Coffey's career was modest at the time but has left a remarkable legacy. As the artist and her work matured, the paintings seem to have become younger in spirit. Her work was eventually sought after by collectors and corporations. In 2003, she had a show, *Colorful Journeys*, at Tory Folliard Gallery in Milwaukee. Art historian Debra Brehmer had a number of insightful observations about Coffey's then new work. Brehmer noted that with all their seeming spontaneity, Coffey's

...play of abstraction and representation is a learned game. Absorbed within these robust compositions is a lifetime of study and observation as well as a calculated cutting and pasting of history.²



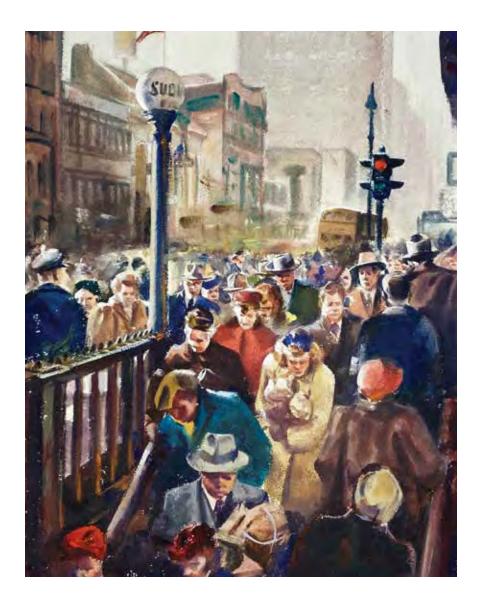




The plates are organized chronologically with a few exceptions. All of the works in the exhibition have been lent by the family of Marion Coffey except where otherwise noted.



Illustration of a Housewife for Chicago Tribune, c. 1945 Gouache on illustration board 21 x 17 in.



People in New York Subway, c. 1946 Gouache on illustration board 11 x 8 1/2 in.

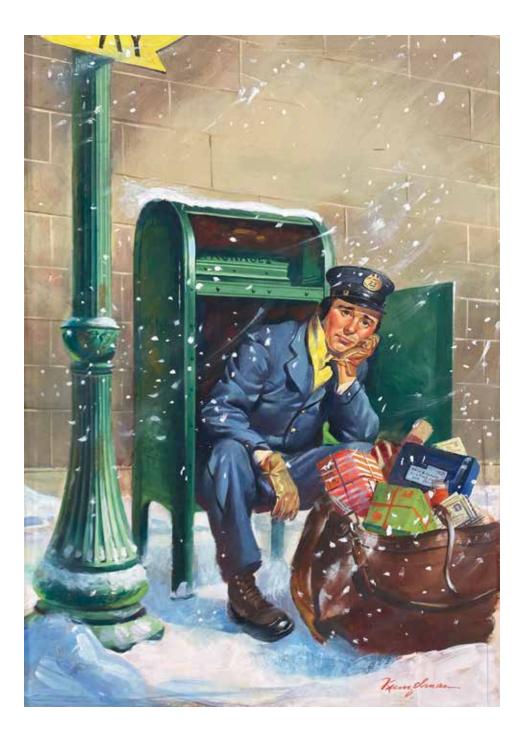
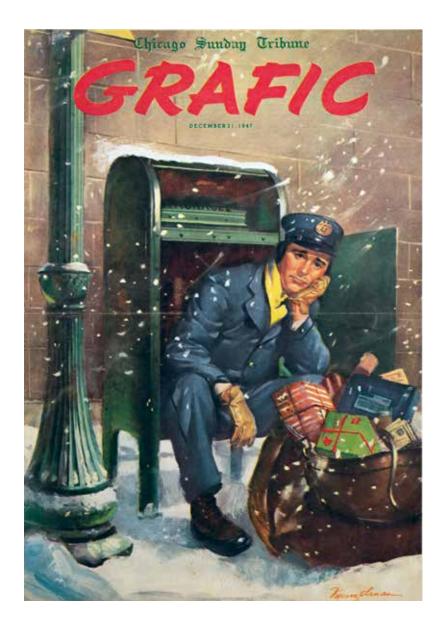


Illustration for Holiday Issue, Chicago Sunday Tribune, Grafic, Dec. 21, 1947, 1947 Gouache on illustration board 27 3/4 x 20 in.



Cover, Holiday Issue, Chicago Sunday Tribune, Grafic, Dec. 21, 1947, 1947 15 \times 10 1/2 in.



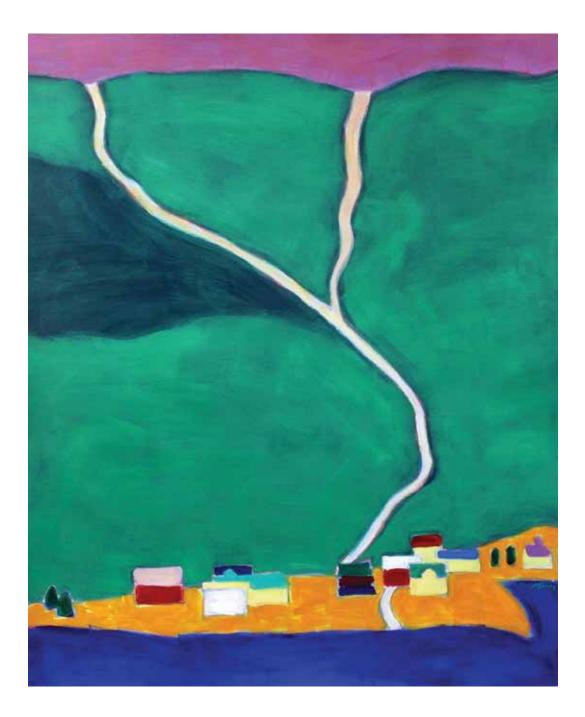
Illustration for Elizabeth Bowen's Novel "The Heat of the Day," Chicago Sunday Tribune, Magazine of Books, Feb. 27, 1949, 1949 Gouache on illustration board 22 x 18 1/2 in.



Cover, Elizabeth Bowen's novel "The Heat of the Day," Chicago Sunday Tribune, Magazine of Books, Feb. 27, 1949, 1949 16 5/8 x 11 5/8 in.







Norwegian Fjord, Green, 1984 Oil on canvas 60 x 50 in.



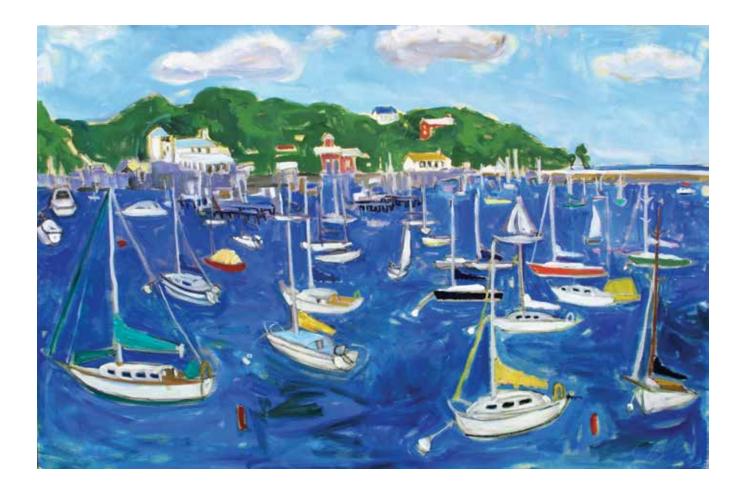


Stars of Norway, 1984 Acrylic on paper 24 x 30 in.



Irises of Ireland, c. 1987 Oil on canvas 48 x 56 in.



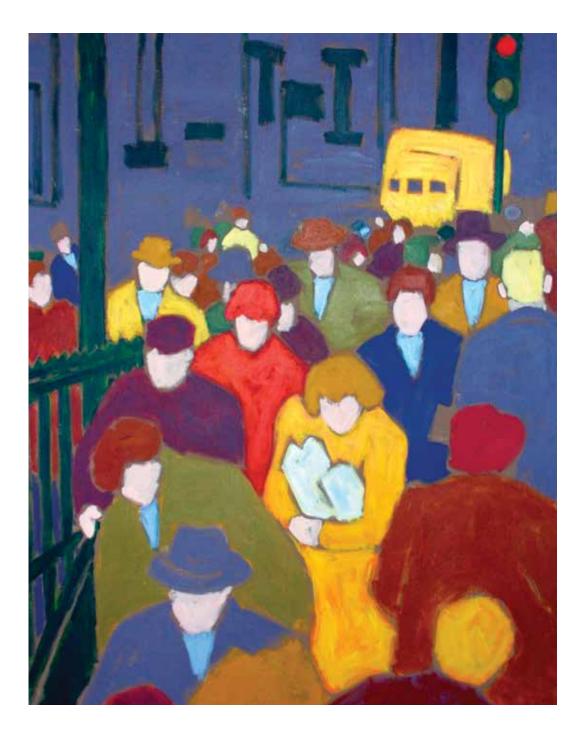


Marina Bee Sting, Bradford Beach, Milwaukee, 1988 Acrylic on canvas 49 x 70 in.

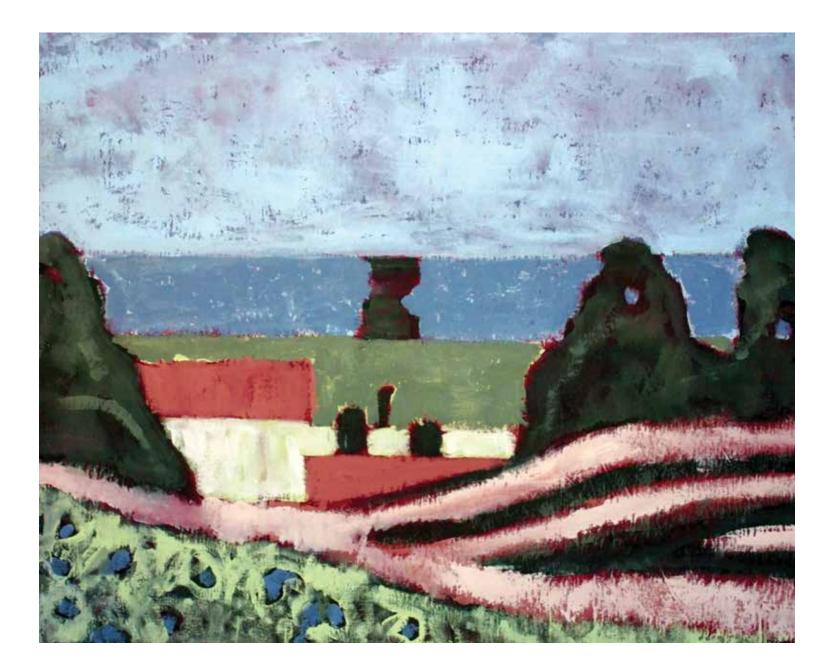




At the Football Game, 1989 Acrylic on canvas 40 x 54 in.



People in New York Subway, 1989 Acrylic on canvas 54 x 40 in.

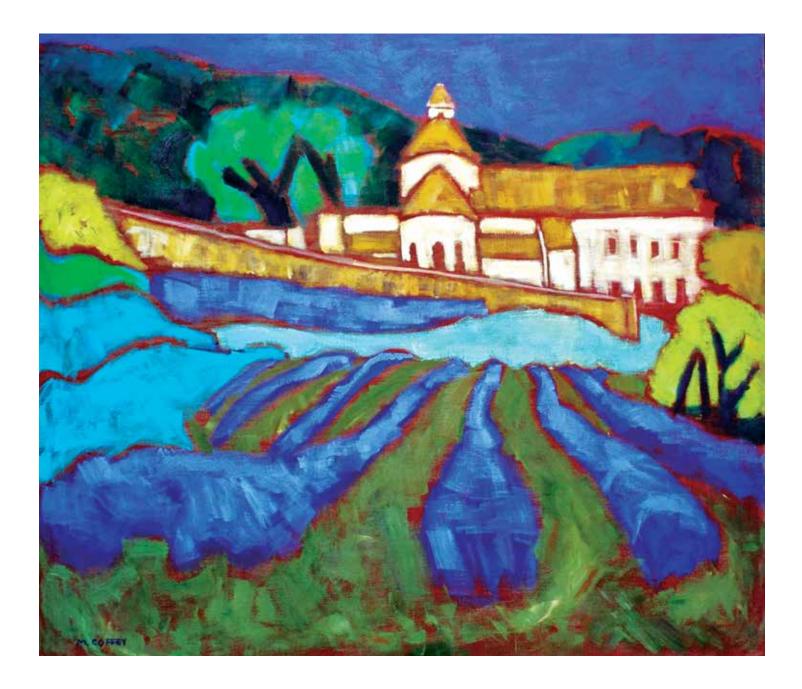


The Red Raspberry Roof, Port Washington, 1989 Oil house paint on canvas 48 x 60 in.





Yellow Tulips, 1994 Oil on canvas 40 x 40 in Lent from the Collection of Karen Blommer



Abbey de Notre Dame de Senaque, Gordes, France, 1996 Oil on canvas 48 x 56 in.



Hydrangeas of Avignon, France, 1996 Acrylic on canvas 30 x 30 in



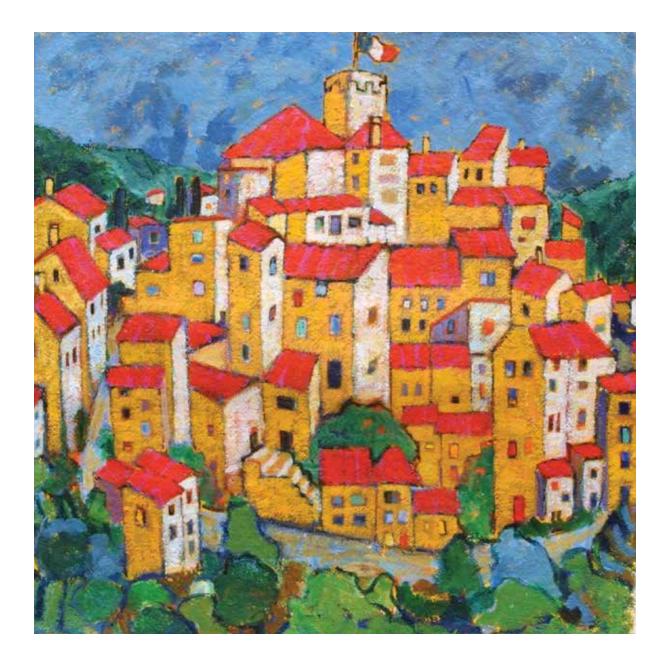


Poppies and Peonies, 1996 Oil on canvas 48 x 36 in. Museum of Wisconsin Art, Gifted 2020, Lynde B. Uihlein



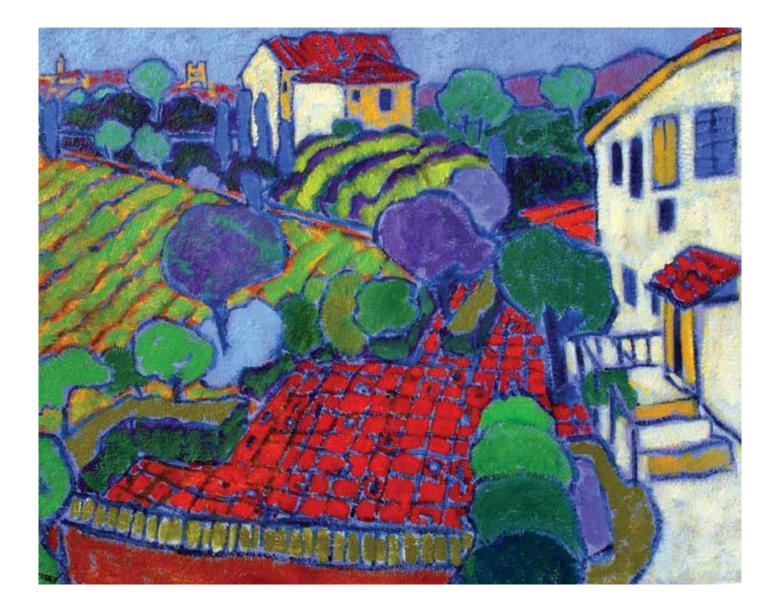


Eze's Purple Tulips, 1997 Acrylic on paper 48 x 36 in.





View of Gordes, France, 1997 Acrylic on paper 40 x 40 in.



Courtyard in Siena, Italy, 1999 Acrylic on paper 38 x 48 in.







Tavalo's Roses, 2000 Oil on canvas 40 x 40 in.

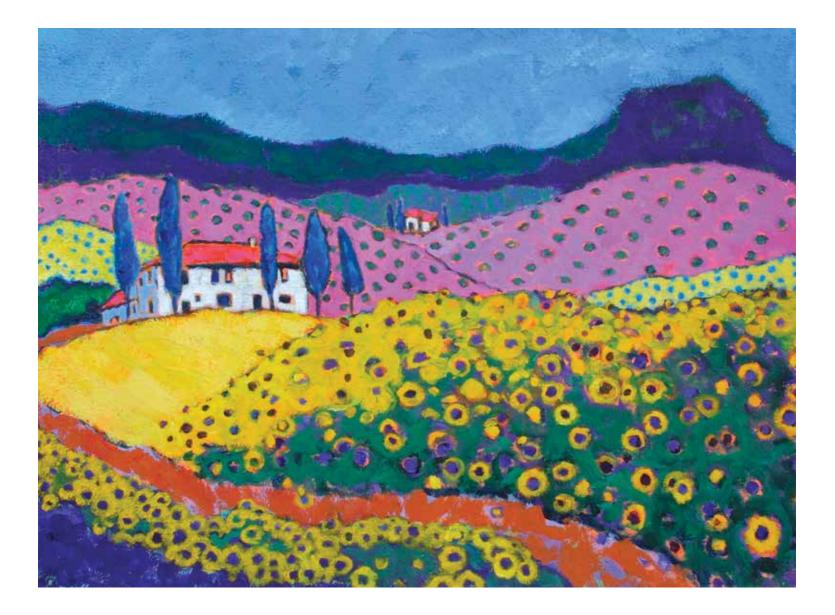




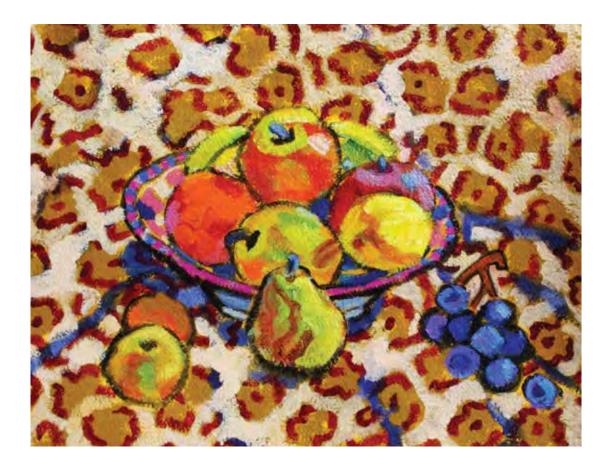
Flag in a Flag, 2001 Acrylic on ripped canvas 12 x 14 in.





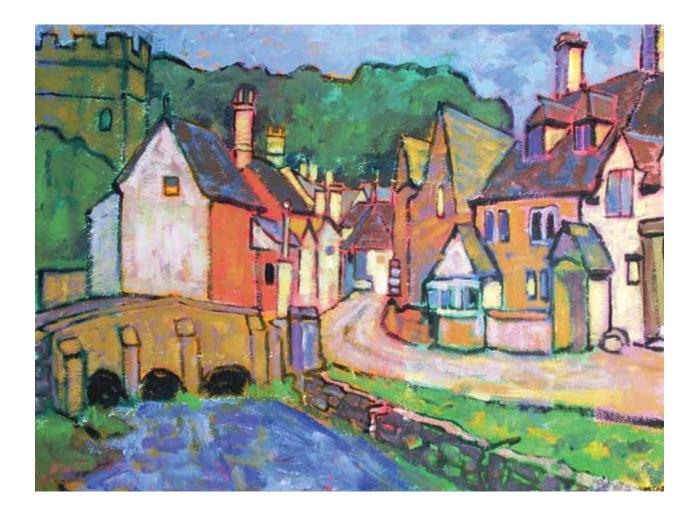


Fields of Petite Luberon, France, 2002 Acrylic on paper 36 x 40 in.



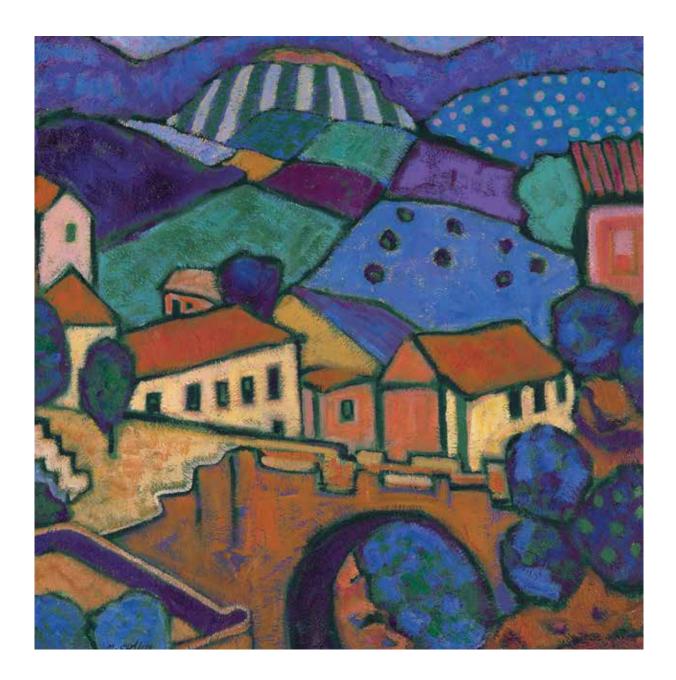


Ravello Bowl with Fruit, 2003 Acrylic on paper 18 1/2 x 23 1/3 in.

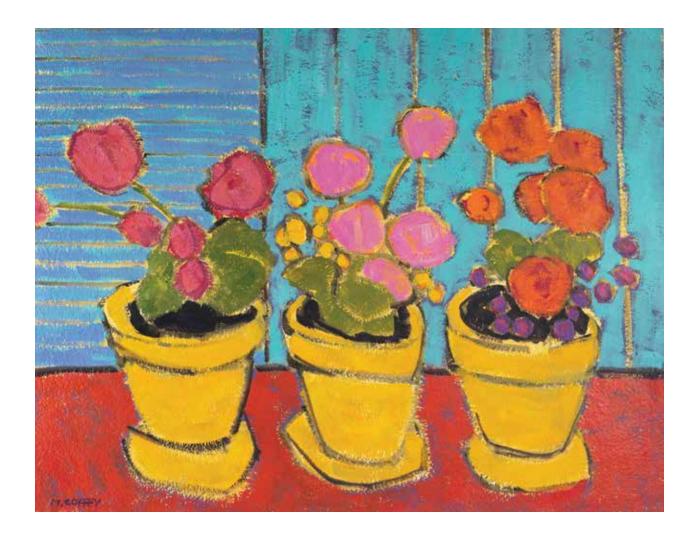




Castle Combe, England, 2004 Acrylic on paper 30 x 40 in.

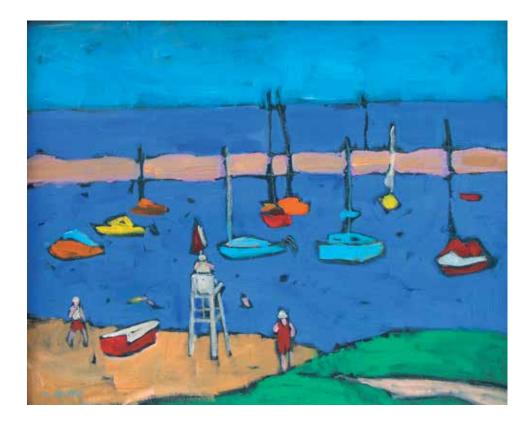


Puente Nuevo, Ronda, Spain, 2004 Acrylic on paper 40 x 40 in.



Marion's Turquoise Shutters with Yellow Pots, 2004 Acrylic on paper 36 x 48 in.

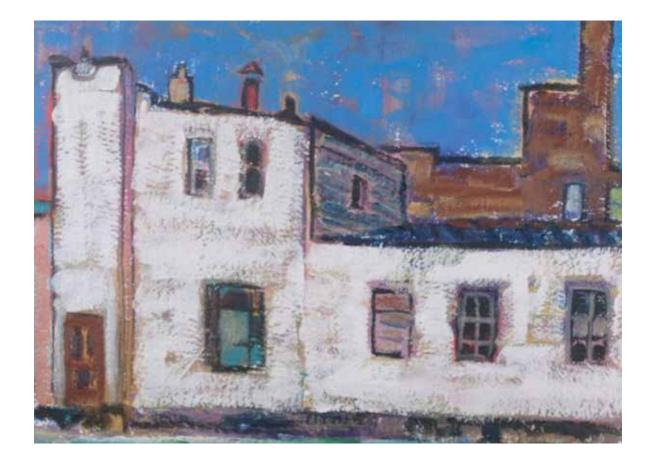




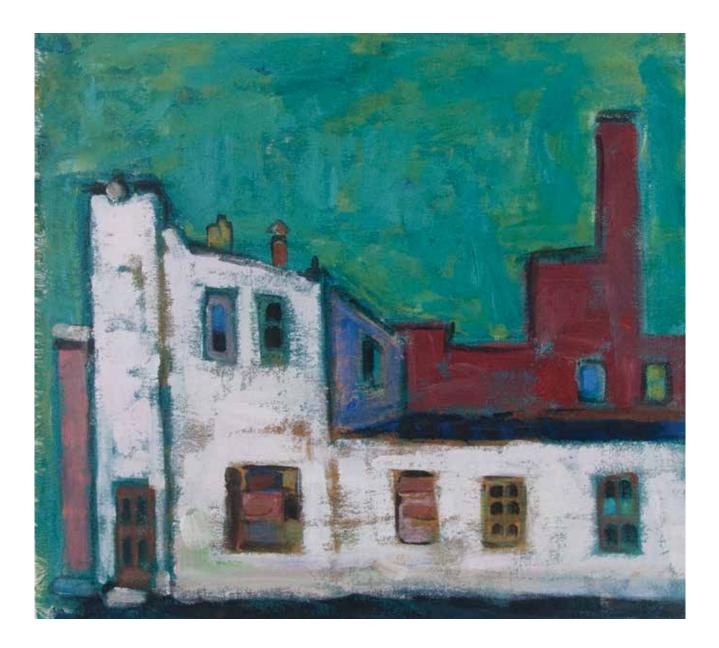
The Guard Chair, Bradford Beach, Milwaukee, 2004 Acrylic on canvas board 16 x 22 in.



South Shore Colorful Marina, Milwaukee, 2005 Acrylic on canvas 48 x 54 in.



Fourth and Vliet Street, Blue, Milwaukee, 2005 Acrylic on paper 11 1/2 × 15 1/2 in.

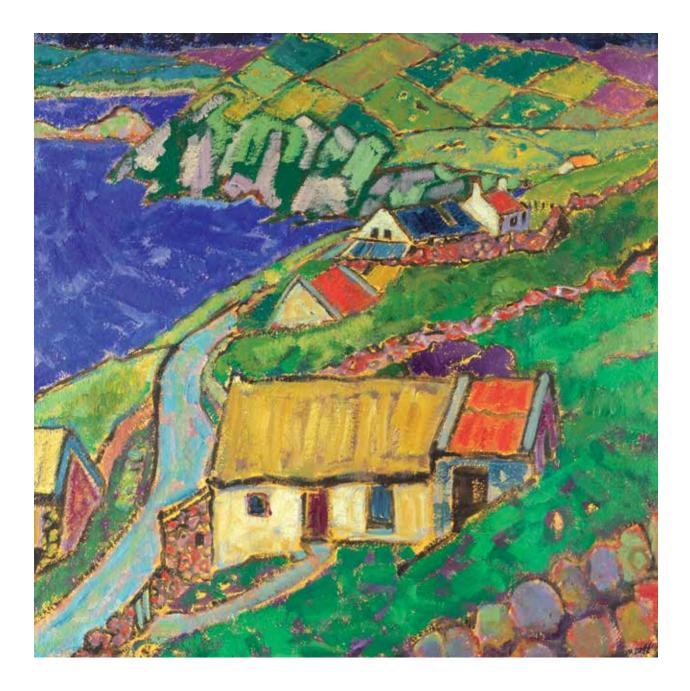


Fourth and Vliet Street, Green, Milwaukee, 2005 Oil on canvas 13 1/2 x 14 in.



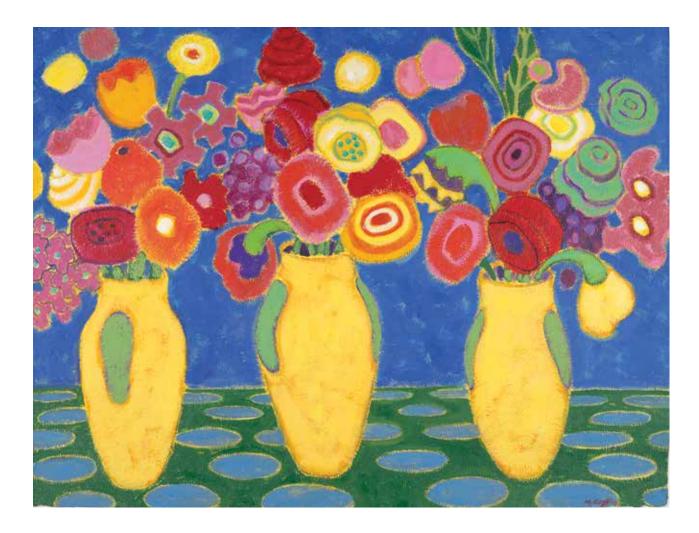


Mauve Sky of Ireland, 2005 Oil on canvas 30 x 42 in.



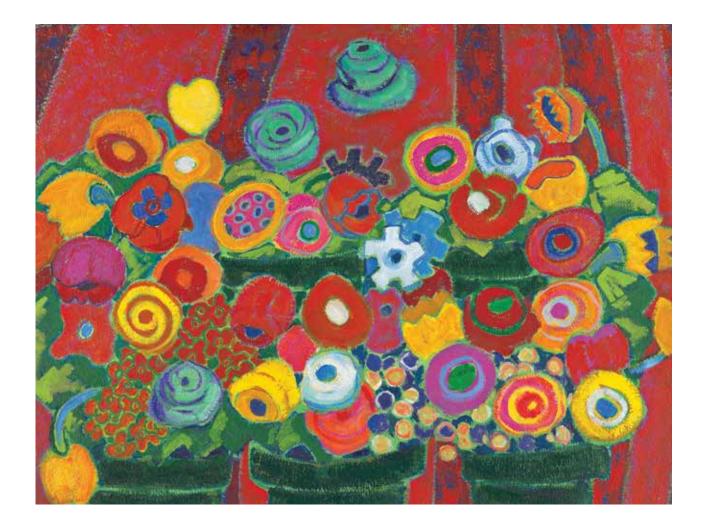
View of Galway Bay, Ireland, 2005 Acrylic on paper 40 x 40 in.





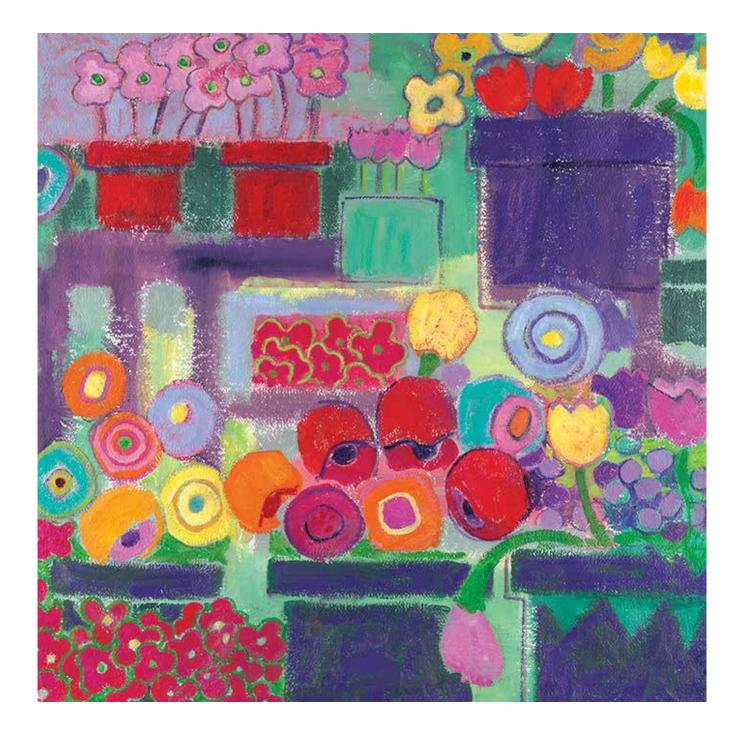


Three Yellow Moretti Vases, 2006 Acrylic on paper 36 x 48 in.





Tony's Flower Shop, 2006 Acrylic on paper 36 x 48 in.





Marnie's Favorite, 2009 Acrylic on paper 40 × 40 in.









EDUCATION

1949, Ecoles d'Art Américaines de Fontainebleau, France The School of the Art Institute of Chicago The American Academy of Art, Chicago

AWARDS

Dane County Cultural Affairs Commission, 2000 Artist Calendar, Madison, Wisconsin Minneapolis College of Art and Design (formerly Federal Art School) Frederic Kimball Mizen Academy of Art Award, Chicago

SELECT EXHIBITIONS

SOLO

2010 Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee, *Home*2008 Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee, *Travels in Kenya and Tanzania*2005 Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee, *Travels in the British Isles*2004 Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee, *Sharing America's Heritage*2003 Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee, *Colorful Journeys*2000 Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee, *Views of Tuscany and Umbria*1998 Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee, *Floral and Landscape Paintings*1996 Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Rose Festival Artist, New Paintings*1990, 1987 David Barnett Gallery, Milwaukee
2014, 2011, 2009 Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee, *Summer in Wisconsin*

2006 Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee, Art and Melody

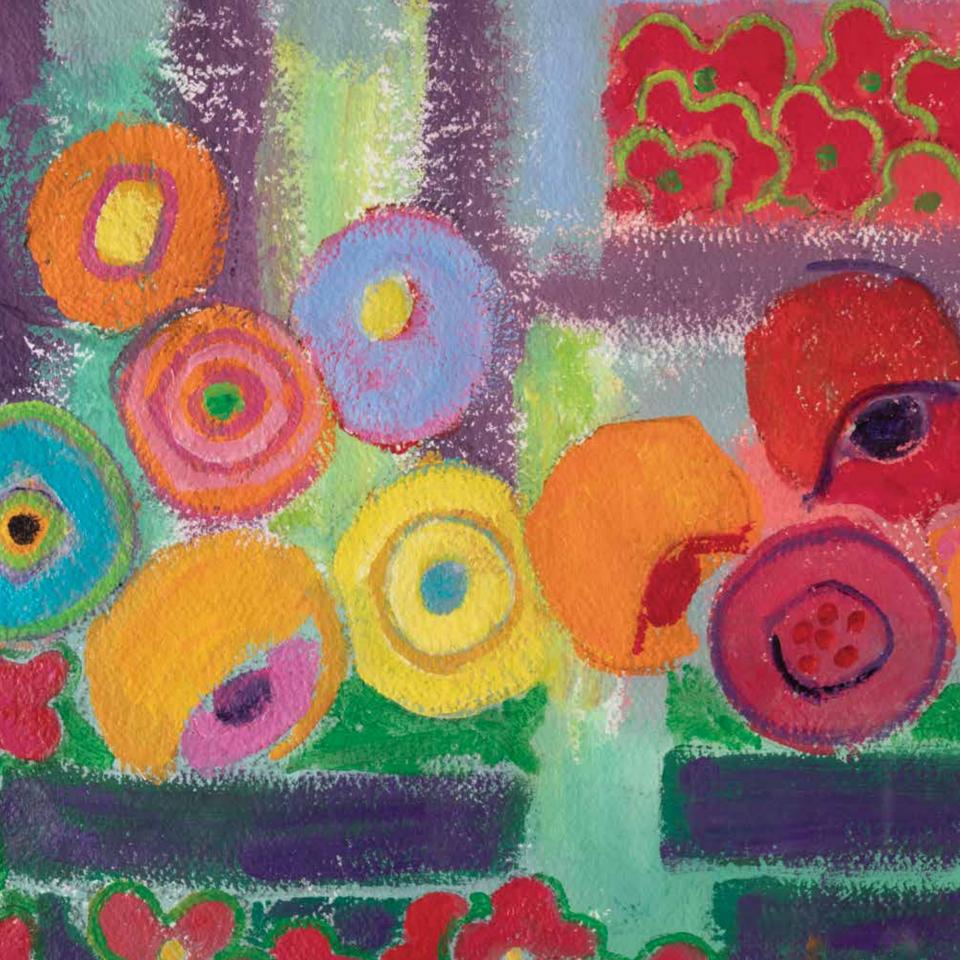
2005, 2002, 2001 Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee, Small Celebrations

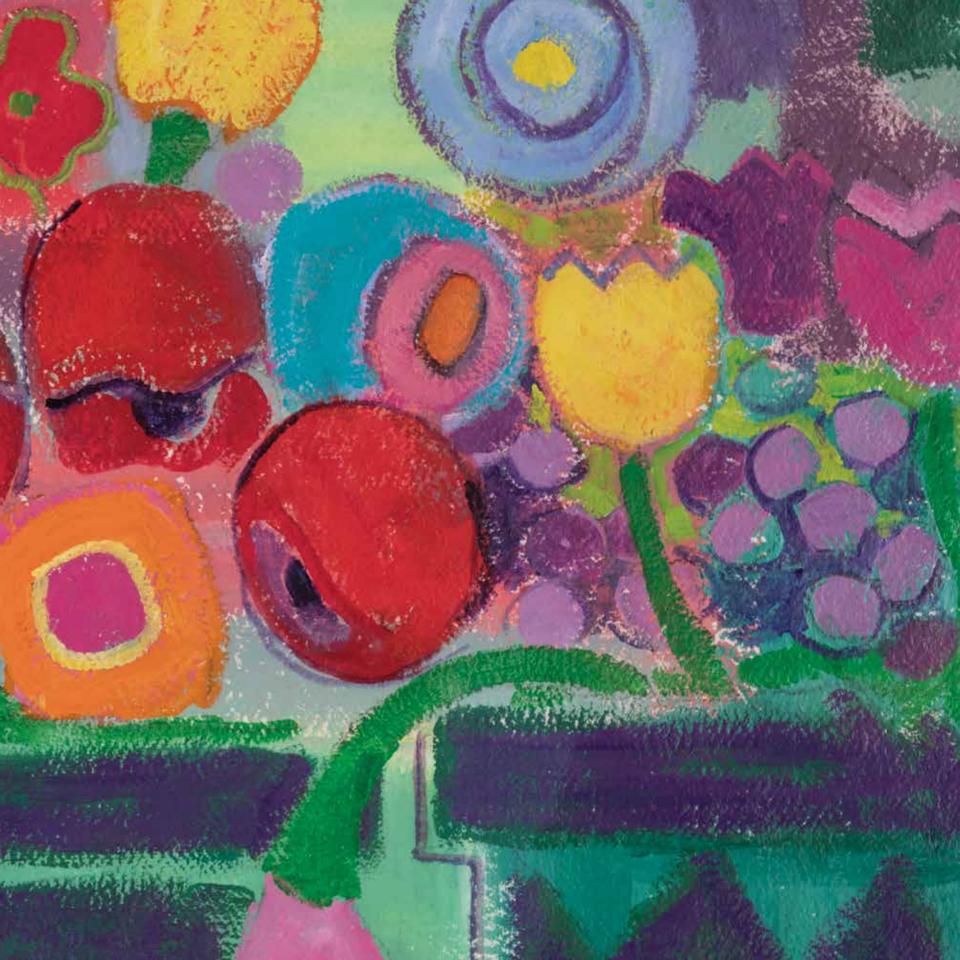
2005, 2004, 2003 International Art Expo, Palm Beach, Florida, artpalmbeach

2002, 2001, 2000, 1999 The W.A.R.D. Gallery, Harbor Springs, Michigan
2002, 2001, 2000, 1999 Jill Bauer Gallery, Naples, Florida
1995 Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts, Racine, Wisconsin, *Watercolor Wisconsin*1994 Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee
1990, 1986, 1985 Cudahy Gallery, Milwaukee Art Museum
1989 Milwaukee Art Museum Exhibition
1986 Chicago Botanical Gardens, Glencoe, Illinois, *Floral '86*1986, 1981 David Barnett Gallery, Milwaukee
1985 Union Art Gallery, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, *Wisconsin Women in Art*

COLLECTIONS

Art in Embassies Program, Prague (2007–2009) Adam Hill Partners, Westport, Connecticut Dane County Court House, Madison, Wisconsin Foley and Lardner, LLP, Milwaukee Froedtert Hospital, Milwaukee Marquette University Law School, Eckstein Hall, Milwaukee Michael Best & Friedrich, LLP, Milwaukee Milwaukee County Court House Northwestern Mutual, Milwaukee Quarles & Brady, LLP, Milwaukee Racon Capital, Milwaukee Robert W. Baird & Co., Milwaukee United States Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals, Chicago The White House, Washington, DC Wisconsin School of Business, University of Wisconsin–Madison





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DETAILS AND IMAGE CREDITS

p. 2, *Fields of Petite Luberon*, France, 2002 (pl. 25); pp. 4–5, *Marina Bee Sting, Bradford Beach, Milwaukee*, 1988 (pl. 11); pp. 6–7, *Courtyard in Siena, Italy*, 1999 (pl. 21); p. 8, *Tony's Flower Shop*, 2006 (pl. 37); p. 12, Marion Coffey, c. 1945. Photographer unknown; p. 18, *Poppies and Peonies*, 1996 (pl. 18); p. 64, Marion Coffey, 2003. Photo by Troy Freund; pp. 68–69, *Marnie's Favorite*, 2009 (pl. 38); Front and Back Covers, *Three Yellow Moretti Vases*, 2006 (pl. 36).



MARIE

The second