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Oklahoma's Sagebrush Artist: **Augusta Corson Metcalfe**

by Linda Koebelen

The paintings and drawings of Oklahoma by its first artists are important historically and in some cases provide the only visual information concerning the country and the people before the invention of the camera. Art, a personal expression and interpretation of one's world, is viewed by artists through their genuine reality and by their most personal experiences and interests. Reality is the artist's way of identifying the most common and superficial experiences of life.

One artist who provided visual interpretations of the early period of Oklahoma's history was Augusta Corson Metcalfe, a pioneer woman who lived in Western Indian Territory. Born near Vermillion, Kansas in 1881, she was brought by her parents to "No Man's Land" in 1886. Seven years later her family moved to a homestead on the Washita River near Durham in the Antelope Hills Country of Oklahoma Territory. There on the Metcalfe ranch, Augusta would live for more than seventy-five years (Melvin Harrel, "My Life in the Indian Territory of Oklahoma," *CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA*, 33 [Spring, 1955], 50; Frederick A. Olds, "Historians and Art: An Oklahoma Case Study," *CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA*, 52 [SUMMER, 1974], 204.)

Augusta Corson Metcalfe never attended public school; but her mother, a former Philadelphia teacher, provided her with tutoring and quality reading material. The youth's talents, however, didn't seem to require formal schooling. Augusta was endowed with a natural ability for art; she never had a lesson. She used painting and drawing to "kill time" ("Brush of Painter Stilled by Death," *THE CHEYENNE STAR*, May 13, 1971, p. 1). Being ambidextrous, she roughed in pastures with her left hand, put in details with her right, and signed with a brand mark. Augusta passed the hours while herding cattle by cutting pictures into rocks.

Horses and sagebrush ranchland, which she knew so well, were her favorite subjects. Metcalfe paid careful attention to detail, reproducing everything as it was — a perfect painting from nature ("Cowboy and Lady," *LIFE MAGAZINE*, July 17, 1950, pp. 70-72.). The style was her own, reflecting her life and history of the region in which she lived.

In 1905, Augusta Corson married James Metcalfe. A few years later, her husband left her with a twenty-five-acre farm, some feed cattle, and a young son (Harrel, p. 60).

Despite these personal hardships, she continued painting and soon acquired fame in several states.

Metcalfe's first recognition came as a blue-ribbon winner at the 1911 Oklahoma State Fair. Nearly four decades later, a newspaper article brought her to the attention of Nan Sheets, director of the Oklahoma Art Center from 1935 to 1965. Sheets arranged for her to have a one-woman art show at the Municipal Auditorium in Oklahoma City in 1949. Following the show, Roy Stewart of the *DAILY OKLAHOMAN* dubbed her the "Sagebrush Artist." In July, 1950, a feature article in *LIFE MAGAZINE* brought Metcalfe international fame. Since then, her work has been on exhibit in the Grand Central Art Galleries in New York City ("Augusta Metcalfe Dies at Age 89," *DAILY OKLAHOMAN*, May 11, 1971, Sec. N, p. 9, cols. 1-2.).

Throughout the years, Metcalfe's native state continued to bestow honors upon her. In 1959, the citizens of Durham procured the services of an Oklahoma City artist, John Metcalf (no relation), to paint a portrait of Western Oklahoma's "Grandma Moses Painter" which hangs in the Cheyenne Room of the Black Kettle Museum in Cheyenne, Oklahoma. Under the direction of the Oklahoma Historical Society, Metcalfe and seven other artists were inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 1968. That same year, she was the subject of a documentary presentation by WKY TV of Oklahoma City ("Brush of Painter Stilled by Death," p. 1).

Augusta Corson Metcalfe died May 9, 1971 at the age of eighty-nine. Fortunately, Western pioneer life has been preserved by her brand of realism. Ranch life, the working of cattle and horses, frontier times, pioneer people, and the scenes and background of their lives, work, and play were the images she painted in "Homestead," "Country Doctor," and "Prairie Fire 1890" ("Augusta Metcalfe, November 10, 1881-May 9, 1971: A Tribute," *OKLAHOMA TODAY*, 22 (SPRING, 1972), p. 11; Irene Lefebvre, "Painter of the Prairies," *OKLAHOMA'S ORBIT* in *THE SUNDAY OKLAHOMAN*, November 14, 1965, p. 6.). In these works she sought to retain the basic impression of visual reality by interpreting the universal meaning that lay beneath the surface appearance of natural forms. Her vivid memory and skillful touch preserved an era, a place, and a colorful record of Western Oklahoma's heritage. ●