



Seeing it her way: the artistic journey of Edwina Hawley Milner

A retrospective exhibition presented by Western New Mexico University

Frances McCray Gallery of Contemporary Art

OCTOBER 4 - NOVEMBER 3, 2018

Dr. Joseph Shepard President, Western New Mexico University

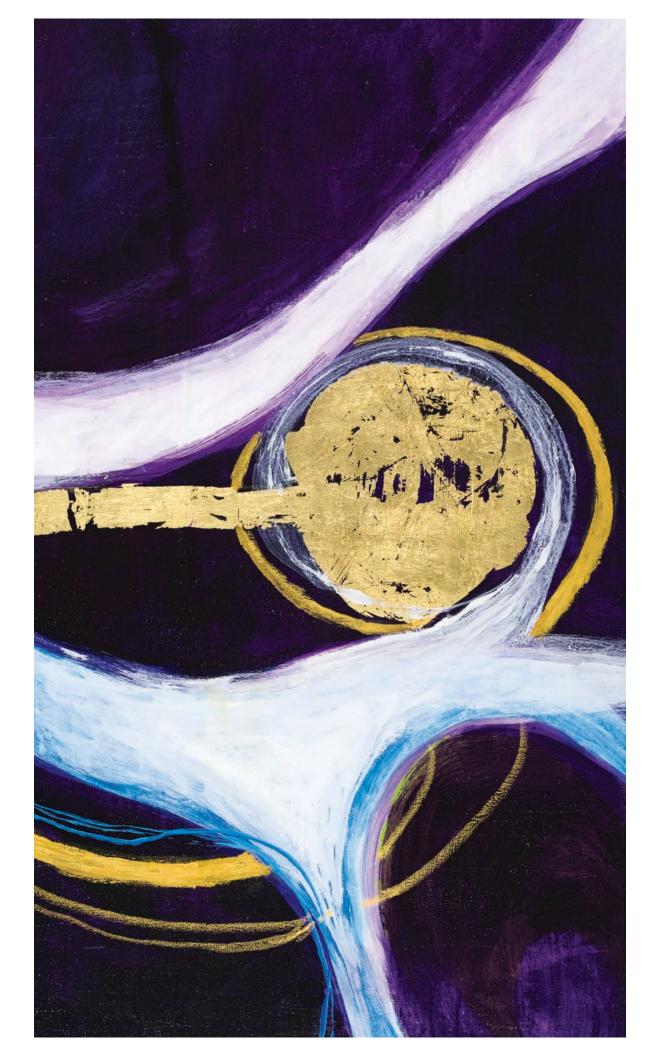
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Art is a reflection of the soul's yearning to be expressed. Edwina Milner has spent a lifetime allowing her soul to speak through the vibrant colors that grace her canvases. Each painting brilliantly reflects on a life well lived of love, friendship, beauty, and her compassion for humanity. Hers has been a journey shared with her beloved Charles, as they have been synonymous with each other in support, kindness and giving.

Her retrospective is but a sample of the artwork that she has accomplished over the years. Each piece presents a path to that which is within her. As I have had the joy and privilege of getting to know the Milners, I am awed by the sheer grace that Edwina brings to all that she does. In her paintings, this grace reveals itself with each delicate stroke of warm hues and golden highlights.

Indeed, if you look closely, the paintings in this retrospective truly give the viewer a glimpse of the extraordinary soul of Edwina Milner – vibrant, poised, playful, caring, and loving.

Dr. Joseph Shepard, *President* Western New Mexico University



Seeing it her way: the artistic journey of Edwina Hawley Milner

This retrospective examination of the artistic journey of Edwina Hawley Milner reveals a body of work born of innate talent, a generous spirit, and a zest for life. The sustained and deliberate rhythm of her art practice is represented in this exhibition by a stunning array of drawings, paintings, and mixed-media artworks spanning more than sixty-five years. Works that embody the joy of art and of art-making that hold the embedded life lessons of a person for whom the glass is always more than half-full.

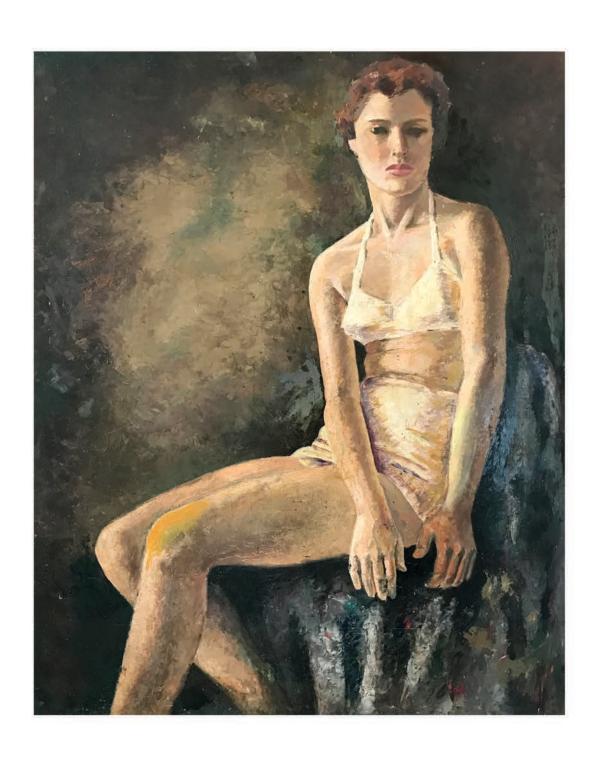
Edwina's inspiring story is informed by her hardscrabble early childhood in West Texas and the Southeastern New Mexico towns of Jal, Eunice, and Hobbs. Her parents were both college educated and married at the outset of the Great Depression. Employment was scarce, but her father finally landed a job as an oil well driller – an avocation which necessitated frequent moves. "He would bring in a well and then we would immediately move to the next place. I lived in about twenty-four or twenty-five different places after I started school."

Edwina recalls that during this period her artistic skills served as entree into what were at the time rather insular communities. "I can remember my first-grade teacher at Lubbock. I think she discovered that I could draw. In different schools, they would use me to draw holiday things and decorate the room and that kind of thing. It helped me greatly to be somebody. Because I would just move in and live there for six months. Most of the little towns never had anybody move into their communities. I was kind of like an oddity to them. Never had anybody to eat lunch with and that kind of thing. So, my art was very important in that respect."

Edwina's artistic talents were evinced at an early age and she believes they derived from both of her parents. "My mother was quite good in art, and she had taken a lot of art classes and had a bunch of oil paintings and everything in her possession, so I probably inherited my artistic abilities. And then my father's family are Chickasaw Indians. Later-on, they started getting together for a reunion every year. They would bring their art projects to this reunion and were real proud of them. So, it was something the whole family did. I always knew that I wanted to take art in college and be an artist."

Edwina started high school in Mertzon, Texas and graduated in a class of seventeen students from Sonora, Texas. She also went to high school in Ozona and San Angelo, Texas. "While I was in Sonora, I did all the art things again. For the school newspaper, I did cartoons. I drew the, I think, the bucking bronco was the symbol of the high school. I drew that for the school annual and all that kind of thing. Anyway, my superintendent, unbeknownst to me, got me a scholarship to UT, where I'd never thought about going. So, my mother packed up my two brothers and me and what possessions we had, and we took off for Austin." Although her father was frequently absent during this period, the tenacity and values of Edwina's mother clearly instilled in her a perseverance that she has carried throughout her life.

Despite societal norms of that time and place which dictated myriad limitations on women, Edwina thrived in the collegiate environment. "I started right out majoring in art. At that time, the art department didn't have their own building or anything – I mean, they had a building, but it was called a hutment and had been built during the Second World War. So, there were a bunch of these hutments that had just been dormitories, really, for soldiers and marines and whatnot. So that was our art building. It was dark [with] few windows [and] small rooms. But anyway, we all loved it. We had wonderful professors. We worked like crazy in this. They never did have a building that was adequate for an art major while I was in school. I went five years, because I worked in the afternoons at a job.



And so, I had long lab hours, with a major in art. I couldn't take as many hours as most fulltime students would. So, I went an extra year."

In the 1950s, opportunities for a woman to have a career or achieve recognition as a 'fine artist' were limited. However, it was more acceptable, and indeed there were more opportunities, for women to utilize their artistic skills in commercial art and design. This reality was reflected in the curriculum available to Edwina at UT Austin. "They imported a teacher for commercial art, and so I took that and was interested in fashion. He would get models for me to draw fashion drawings and so on. Then one of the upper-class boys was really good. He was working for Goodfriends, which was like a small Neiman Marcus in Austin. He got me a job there."

Edwina excelled in this new position and would go on to leverage her artistic talents doing ads and illustrations for other prominent businesses. She eventually landed a job as the head of advertising for Buttrey's, a large department store in Austin. It was also during this period that Edwina met Charles Milner who was a couple of years ahead of her in school. The two were engaged for a year while he was in a training program in petroleum engineering during which he was required to move from town to town every few months. Edwina recalls that while head of advertising for Buttrey's she "made a good salary and I made more than Charlie did when he started out with a Master's Degree in petroleum engineering." (It is worth noting that Charles would go on to become president of a large international consulting firm of petroleum engineers and geologists with headquarters in Houston and offices in Denver and Calgary)

The two eventually settled in Houston – a move that defined this chapter in Edwina's artist journey. Shortly after she and Charles bought their first house, a neighbor, Iris Siff, who was prominent in Houston theatre, became aware of Edwina's talents and hired her to design costumes. "I did Showboat. It had two hundred costumes over four fashion periods. The theatre rented a house for me, and I had seventeen seamstresses there working on all these costumes. Then I had about four major people who made the stars' costumes. We'd have to go to their houses to get fitted for the stars. So that was my initial introduction to designing costumes for theatre. It was really fun."

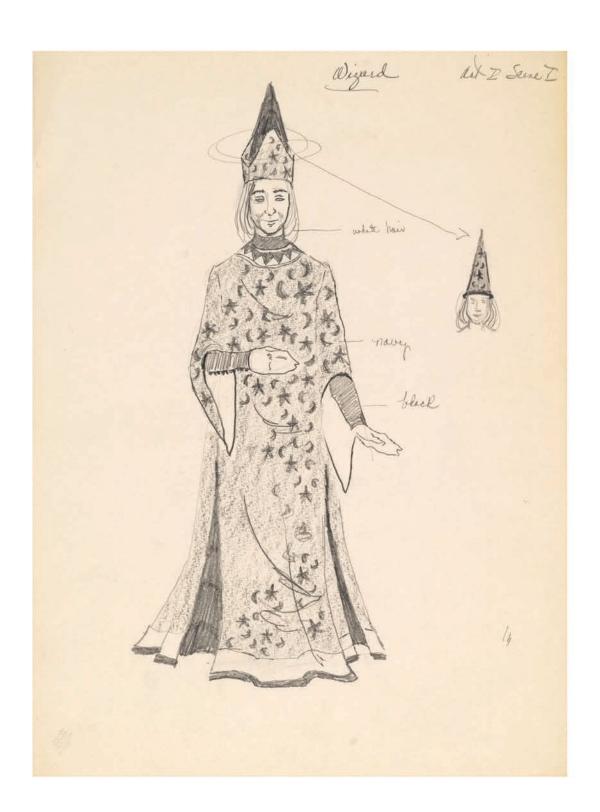
It was also during the production of *Showboat* that Charles and Edwina would adopt their first child. Parenthood didn't slow Edwina though, and with Charles' help she was able to continue costuming for a time. "Charlie said go ahead, I know you love this work, so go ahead, and I'll come home and take care of the baby after work. After that, I worked on *Once Upon a Mattress*."

Acclimating to the demands of parenthood after adopting her second child, Edwina found a way to continue to paint. "When the babies were young, I would have people come by and sit for portraits. I was really good in catching people's likeness and doing portraits. I fit it in that way." After the children started school Edwina found other ways to express her love of art. She recalls one project in particular that she conceived as a way to expose students and parents to art. "They had canceled the art classes in the elementary school. I designed a program through the PTA of art history and ordered little prints of artist cards and so I had about forty women from the [PTA]. They selected one artist that they studied up on. They had these little prints that I got for them to hand out to every student of that artist. I scheduled them to go once a month to the classes to give lectures on their particular artist."

By the mid-1960's Edwina was exhibiting her paintings at galleries and in various shows in the Houston area. She was also continuing to be inspired by the broader art scene and museum world that was evolving in Houston during that period. Edwina was particularly influenced by exhibitions and educational programming sponsored by patrons John and Dominique de Menil.







Edwina recounts the time she and a friend visited Dominique at her home. "We went to her home – she was showing my friend and me some of the art that they had collected. And so, she opened this closet door and here were all these paintings just lined up – as, you know, as many as she could get in. And she pulled out one – the first painting that they ever commissioned. [She and John] had gotten married, had all this wealth, and someone said 'well, y'all ought to collect art. So, they thought about it, and they didn't know anything about art. So, the person said, 'well this artist has really become well-known, and why don't you go to him'. Let's see, I believe it was Max Ernst."

"And so, [the de Menils] went to him and commissioned a portrait to be done of her. And, so, he did this about this size portrait (gesturing) of just the top part of her, and her face and everything. And then he had floating in the background — the background was all orange — and floating in the background were these seashells. And they hated the portrait, they hated it — so they didn't accept it. And later they discovered — they went to an art supply store — and there it was in the window, for sale. So, they bought it and hid it. They actually wrapped it in brown paper when the Nazi's were invading Paris and put it on top of a wardrobe before they left Paris. So, then they came to NY and Houston and learned to love modern art. And so, when they got back to Paris they discovered this portrait — still there wrapped up on top of that wardrobe."

A lifelong learner, Edwina continued her art education by auditing art history and studio art classes at Rice University (many of which were underwritten by the de Menils). She relates an experience in one of her classes that solidified her embrace of abstract forms. "I remember an instructor at Rice University. I can't remember his name, but he was quite good in teaching art, in teaching about seeing things. I remember one class that we would get a glass of water in a plastic glass and then drop ink in it, and [tell us to] draw that. That was kind of my introduction to abstraction."

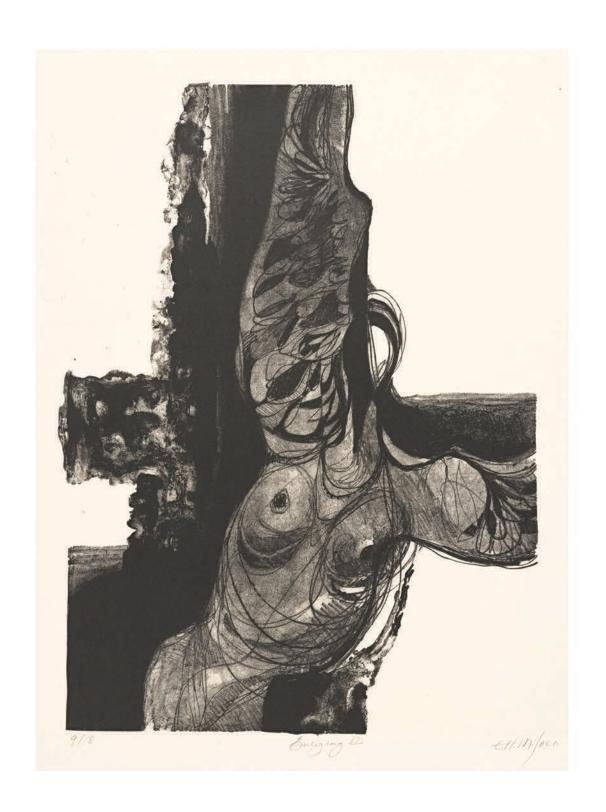
This was indeed a pivotal period in the cultural life of Houston and in Edwina's own artistic journey. Her exposure to modernist and abstract works became fused into her works as she tended more and more towards combining abstract and figurative elements. This was a stylistic evolution that foreshadowed the future direction of Edwina's artwork, but it was other machinations in the museum and gallery world that would continue to inform her work as an arts advocate to this day.

"I was real interested in art, so I'd go to all the galleries and the Museum of Fine Arts. They hired a new director. He was a real outstanding art executive from New York City, and he'd been director of the Metropolitan. Anyway, Houston hired him to be head of the Museum of Fine Arts. He immediately organized a juried show and the museum had never sponsored a juried show. I didn't enter it... but a lot of my friends entered it. One woman that I knew won first prize. She signed her name with initials. When the jury at the museum found out that this was a woman who had won first prize, they took the prize away. No publicity was ever in the paper or anything about that. That was the way of the world at that time, in the '50s, and '60s, and '70s."

"We all signed our work with our initials, so that people would buy our work, thinking that it was by a male artist. Women weren't represented in museums, they weren't represented in art galleries. Very few, maybe one woman would be in an art gallery, one woman artist, and all the rest men. Anyway, we all signed our name. I still do that, E. H. Milner."

Determined to do what she could to address gender bias and inequality in the art world, Edwina would devote significant time in the coming years to promoting women in the arts. It was an encounter with Texas Governor Ann Richards, herself a staunch advocate for women's rights, that Edwina describes as being





a pivotal moment in her own advocacy for women in the field. "I got invited to the Governor's mansion for some women's activity. [Ann Richards] was a backer of art. Also, the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. was organizing just about that time. They had one of the first organizations of a show at the women's museum from Texas. I got involved in that way and was asked to be a member of the Texas committee. So, I was a member of the Texas committee of the National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA). Later, Charles and I were asked to be on the National Advisory Board [of NMWA]"

Edwina would continue her work on behalf of the NMWA when she and Charles relocated to New Mexico in the early 90s. With the idea of inspiring activism among her likeminded friends in her adopted hometown, Edwina would invite her colleagues from the Texas Committee to hold one of their meetings in Santa Fe. "I invited the Texas committee to come for one of their meetings. The whole Texas committee came, and we celebrated New Mexico, because I did everything New Mexico for the Texas committee to recognize the art here. It was just wonderful. Then I organized a committee here in New Mexico, and we started sponsoring a show every other year of New Mexico living women artists. The first year, several women who were accepted in our show got representation in galleries because of the show. Then every other year we would sponsor a day of women's fashion designers and jewelers, and it'd be in some place where the artists could all bring a rack of clothes. We'd serve food all day long, and they'd try on clothes and jewelry and accessories, and sell for that whole day. We'd have something every year, either the art show or that fashion show, while I was president. That was about the first five years of the organization."

Edwina notes that while her role as an advocate was deeply fulfilling, it required a hiatus from making art to avoid conflict of interest with exhibitions and programming she was promoting. "[NMWA] finally organized some rules, kind of, and they didn't want artists on the state committees. I didn't want to be on a competing thing if I was showing. So, I just stopped painting and used all my effort to be president of the committee."

Edwina's efforts were not limited to NWMA. "At one time, I was on eight museum boards here in Santa Fe." She was recognized for her major support of the arts in 2006 when NM Governor Bill Richardson presented her with the GOVERNOR'S AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN THE ARTS – a rarified honor reserved for the state's top artists and patrons. While the Milner's most publicly visible contribution to the cultural landscape of New Mexico is Milner Plaza on Museum Hill in Santa Fe – for which they were the lead donors in the 1990s – it is more recent support of the New Mexico School for the Arts (NMSA), and support of women in the arts programming at Western New Mexico University in Silver City that has become their focus. Edwina notes that it is her own life experiences that drive her philanthropic philosophy. "I think it's helping kids learn more about what they love. Because I never had an art class, in all those twenty-five schools that I went to. Except for that music appreciation class that I took one semester. I realize how much richer my life is because of that one little class. I'm thrilled with [NMSA], and the kids work so hard."

In recent years Edwina has once again been able to devote time to her own art. "I turned eighty, and I thought, boy, I'd better get to painting. Because I don't have that much time left once I get to eighty." When she made the decision to return to painting she jump started her practice by doing numerous abstract works on paper in which the freedom from figurative elements allowed an uninhibited dialog between the paint and the surface. "Oh, it was a joy, because color is my thing. I could always draw and reproduce likenesses of people and animals and flowers and everything. But I love color. These great big sheets, and I would just start with color. Without subject matter. That was kind of a first for me. When I'd enter that door, and the light was in the room, and the room itself, and the atmosphere out the windows, was just wonderful. I just worked my head off and loved every minute of it."

Edwina's return to the studio was characterized by the special freedom she found to "... just do anything I wanted to. I didn't have to paint for a particular show or exhibit or anything. I could just do what I wanted to. That's what I did with color, primarily." She has also enjoyed her rediscovery of mixed-media elements such as gold leaf. "I'd always worked with gold leaf, I've worked with gold leaf for at least forty years. And in different ways. But more abstractly [now since] I started back in my 80s. I used it completely differently than what gold leaf was originally for. I wanted to put it on and kind of let it do its own thing. I would paint color first and then apply the gold leaf. When it dried, I would wipe it off real strongly and let it decide where it was going to be. It was real abstract, completely abstract. Not figures abstracted, but completely abstract."

Although these works are totally nonfigurative, underlying narratives about her own life journey are plumbed in pieces such as *Passing Crossroads* and *Tree of. Life.* These autobiographical works arose from stories or memories triggered while spending time in her studio. "I was working by myself completely, all day long, every day. I'd start thinking about some subject or another, or something that I wanted to talk to someone about. Instead, I'd talk to the painting, or through the painting."

Edwina relates how this new body of work evolved and came to be surveyed in an important exhibition in Santa Fe in 2014. "Just about the time that I was really working here, Cynthia Canyon, who is the editor of *Trend* magazine, became a friend and wanted me to meet with a gallery owner here, on Canyon Road. She suggested that we coordinate and have a gallery opening for me, for a one artist show. I had a few things. But this was about six months in advance of this show. So, I was able to work and do things for the show. That's when I came up with this idea of the *Golden Pathways*. It was a time when I was kind of reviewing my life and how many schools I attended and all that kind of thing. But I had no hometown essentially. I had been influenced by all of these places."

It was during this same time frame that eye problems, wet macular degeneration, which had originally been diagnosed several years earlier, began to require more of Edwina's attention. "My eye problem started about fifteen years ago. I knew that something was wrong. We finally went to a doctor, Mayo in Baltimore. A woman who was head of the eye department, said 'yes, you're gonna need surgery on your eye', but said, you're not quite ready for it. It was a long time — it didn't happen suddenly. I went to the doctors here and one doctor put me in contact lens, and that was fabulous. Because I could really see, with contacts, where I couldn't see with glasses. Then, all of a sudden, I kind of had an attack on my eyes, and each one was a little different. So, one doctor here operated on one eye. I pretty well lost the use of that eye."

Faced with this new reality, Edwina did what she had always done – adapt. And, in her case adapting meant abstracting, and absorbing inspiration around her. Edwina found delight both in the process of giving herself over to the color found in floral catalogs and her own garden, and a serendipitous encounter with the work of Gustave Klimt. "This business of abstracting – I really couldn't see across the room to draw an object, like I'd always drawn people or other objects. It was natural for me. I loved color and to just do abstraction. And then, when I started losing more sight and so on, and was not sure of what I was doing, a friend of mine had given me this calendar of Gustave Klimt. I was taking it apart and taking all the letters and notes out of the calendar. Mostly, it was his portraits that he had drawn in Vienna of these handsome women at the turn of the century when art nouveau was at its height. I love that particular period, and I loved his portraits. I thought, gee, there must be something I can do with these, as I flipped through the pages. About that time – it was in the wintertime, and I started receiving catalogs of gardening. Of course, that's my other love, gardening. I decided to combine the portraits with gardening and the kind of abstract feeling. I paint on the smaller pieces that I felt like that I could manage. I felt like with my eye problems I couldn't manage the larger pieces. So, I combined all those and



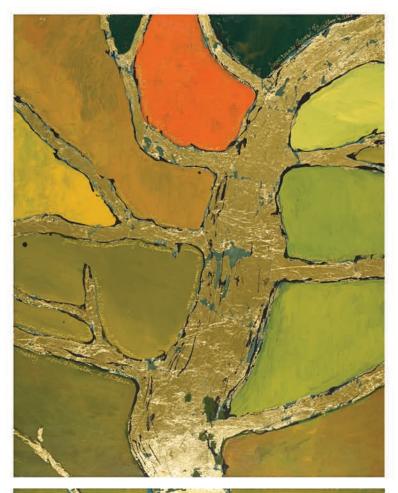
started these collages ... I think they're little jewels, I consider them my little jewels."

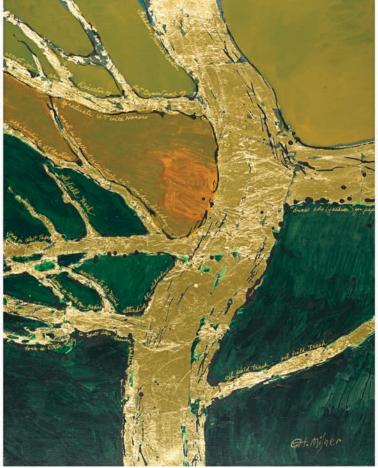
When asked about how she maintains such a positive outlook on life, Edwina replies that it is a combination of reflecting the goodness she finds in others, and the good fortune to have found a lifelong soulmate in husband Charles. "People, I love people. I love being around people, and goodness and happiness. I'm fortunate to have married a person who is nice and agreeable and ... on the same wavelength. We've helped each other. He in his career and I in mine. It never bothered me that, when we didn't have money in our early marriage, and we started out without a dime, so to speak. We had a car and three degrees, and that was it. I never was interested in jewels or furs or anything like that. We never spent money on boats and all the things that you accumulate. Instead, we concentrated on Charles' job and improving ourselves through art and through work. We never spent our money foolishly on things."

The values and philosophy of life embodied in Edwina's art and her artistic journey are a testament to the importance of finding and nurturing what you love. In balancing the desire for self-expression with the need to contribute to the greater good, Edwina has ensured that she will always occupy a special place in the hearts of those who know her. May the light that she and Charles hold continue to burn bright to show the rest of us the way.

James Rutherford, *Guest Curator* Santa Fe, New Mexico – Summer 2018







Tree of Life - c. 2013, acrylic and gold leaf on canvas, diptych 60" x 24"



Edwina Hawley Milner in her studio - Santa Fe, New Mexico - 2018

