

# Jessie Marion Koogler McNay

1883-1950



## BIOGRAPHY

Jessie Marion Koogler was born on February 7, 1883 in DeGraff, Ohio, the pampered only child of Dr. Marion A. and Clara (Lippincott) Koogler. Moving to El Dorado, Kansas the following year, the Koogler's made their home at 729 West Central.

As a young adult, Jessie was a strikingly handsome woman with classical features, an abundance of straight black hair, and a regal bearing that gave an impression of height although she was only slightly over five feet tall. Becoming heavier in later life, she had extremely expressive eyes that spoke for her. Friends recalled her as intelligent and articulate, jolly with a nice laugh and a deep voice. While one of the richest ladies in the state of Texas, she lived a simple life. She was described as a sweet, strange, and lonely lady.

At an early age she began to express herself in painting. Still existing are two small oil paintings on cardboard, both dated and signed on the back "June, 1892, El Dorado, Kansas, Jessie M. Koogler." They reveal an amazing degree of maturity and skill far beyond the average nine year old. Seeing her first art exhibit at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, she was to keep the catalogue of the exhibition the rest of her life.

In 1900 Jessie was selected to take a special drawing course at the University of Kansas. During her two years at Lawrence, Jessie's personality blossomed, overcoming her former shyness to become more confident and self-reliant. Art started to become a compulsive and consuming interest.

Determined to continue her studies at the Art Institute of Chicago, Dr. Koogler held to his firm opinion that no proper young lady should be encouraged to study art beyond painting flowers on china. Rather than her usual trick of getting her way – taking to her bed – she renewed her interest in former suitor Ray Tack, whom her father disapproved of. This brought immediate results; Dr. Koogler consented to her enrollment at the Institute.

It was in Chicago that Jessie Marion Koogler forever dropped the name Jessie, using instead her father's name, Marion. She considered the name Jessie to be odious because of its association with El Dorado's most notorious murderess, Jessie Morrison, who had cut her rival's throat with a razor. Old friends in El Dorado, however, continued to call her Jessie.

Marion was enchanted with Chicago. Though the times and people's taste in art were conservative, she had a front-row seat to the newly emerging Modern Art. In May of 1913 she witnessed the first American exhibition of Modern Art, the Armory Show, when it came to the institute. Marion returned again and again to eagerly study the works of Van Gogh, Cezanne, Picasso, Gauguin, Pissarro, and many others.

After graduating, Marion divided her time between her parents' home and the Institute. Her parents had at this time moved to Marion, Ohio.

In Chicago, Marion accepted a position as a medical illustrator for a noted Chicago surgeon. She loved her work and was disheartened when Dr. Koogler, appalled at her employment, immediately summoned her home. She made another attempt at a career in 1914, accepting a position as a public school art teacher. Considered a fine teacher, she decided to make teaching a full-time career, but again was kept home by her father's persuasion.

In March, 1916, Marion met Don Denton McNay, superintendent of Marion Street Railway. Don was ten years younger than Marion, a hard-working, serious-minded young man. Dr. Koogler at last gave his consent to marriage. When the United States went to war against Germany, Don enlisted in the Army as a sergeant, with orders to report to Laredo, Texas. As a wedding present, Dr. Koogler gave his daughter 160 acres of his Kansas land, reasoning that she would need some security since Don insisted that his bride would have to do the best she could on his meager army pay.

During their short time living in Laredo, Marion gathered memories she cherished throughout her life. When Don was ordered to Florida a few months later, Army restrictions prevented Marion from going with him. As his company assembled for departure in San Antonio, they said goodbye at the Alamo, which thereafter became a personal symbol for Marion.

A few weeks later, news came of Don's serious illness. He died on October 25th of the Spanish influenza sweeping the nation in 1918. For Marion, this sorrow never completely healed; her futile pursuit of happiness resulted in four more marriages, each ending in divorce. Fortunately, she heeded her father's oft repeated admonition to retain control of her fortune and business affairs.

Remembered by friends for her generosity, McNay gave liberally to organized charities, churches of all denominations, civic, fraternal, political and cultural organizations. If a friend expressed admiration for one of her possessions, it was likely to be received as a gift on some future occasion. Every act of simple kindness or courtesy was repaid a hundredfold. On one occasion, she wrote a note of thanks and appreciation for services rendered when paying a

traffic ticket. Her generosity extended beyond money; when her Negro chauffeur became mortally ill in New Mexico and professional help was not immediately available, she nursed and cared for him herself.

From 1939, McNay's most frequent and bountiful contributions were to Roman Catholic organizations. From girlhood when her Protestant parents forbid marriage to a Catholic, Marion had had an almost compulsive though secret curiosity about the Catholic Church. Later, in the traditionally Catholic city of San Antonio, she became an active supporter of the Church and eventually a convert.

Remembering the housing shortage as a bride during World War I, Marion purchased and furnished fifteen rental units and apartments to her home during World War II for the use of service personnel. She seldom cashed her tenants' rental checks.

A woman of vision and strong conviction, as well as a watercolorist and collector of French modern art, McNay devoted her life, her fortune, and her home to bringing a living art to her adopted home of San Antonio. She not only collected art; she participated in its creation through her support and encouragement of many artists of various media.

As early as 1942, McNay entertained thoughts of leaving her growing collection of art as the beginnings of a museum of modern art, one of the first in America. Before her death of pneumonia on April 13, 1950, she worked towards that goal with excitement. Following her death, she was buried in the cemetery of the Sisters of St. Anthony, near Charles Umlauf's Crucifix sculpture she had commissioned in 1946.

One-time director of the McNay Art Museum, John P. Leeper expressed the public's appreciation, saying, "A profound debt of gratitude is owed Marion Koogler McNay, a debt best repaid by maintaining the severe standards of quality which governed her taste in painting . . . using and enjoying her collection with the same unswerving intelligence with which it was formed and given to the people."

On July 8, 1910, Marion Koogler became a charter member of the Susannah French Putney chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, serving as Vice Regent. She later belonged to the Art League and the San Antonio Conservation Society.

#### CONNECTION TO BUTLER COUNTY

Growing up in El Dorado, this environment gave Jessie Marion Koogler an earthiness, a sense of humor and loyalty, a love for nature, and in some unaccountable way, her devotion to art and beauty. She attended local schools through high school.

Her father, Dr. Marion A. Koogler, was the first of his family to forsake farming for a profession. Seeing the shortage of doctors while serving in the Civil War, he entered medical college. He practiced medicine for almost 40 years, though he never lost the respect for good farm land. His medical profession served him as a means of acquiring land. Less than a year after arriving in El Dorado, he made his first Butler County land purchase and continued buying land, often consulting with close friend and patient James W. Teter. He had an appreciation for the native bluestem grass so valuable for cattle. By 1908 he owned 3,248 acres, all in Butler County southwest of El Dorado.

El Dorado's first successful oil well was brought in during September, 1915, and the town was soon a boom town. Much of the acreage still owned by Dr. Koogler was under oil and gas leases, eventually making the family wealthy. By 1935 the Koogler wells had produced over four million barrels from its 104 wells. They continued producing strong throughout Marion's life.

#### COMING TO / LEAVING THE AREA

The Koogler family arrived in El Dorado, Kansas in 1884 when Dr. Koogler accepted a position as doctor and surgeon for the Santa Fe Railroad. The Koogler's found the move to be a good one, though Mrs. Koogler never stopped pining for Ohio.

Their first home in town was a modest frame house at 608 Star Street (today it is numbered 620). About eight years later, the family moved into the more pretentious Victorian house at 729 West Central Avenue.

Jessie frequently accompanied Dr. Koogler on his social and business calls. She became acquainted with Mrs. Marie Antoinette Murdock, wife of then political boss of Butler County, Thomas Benton Murdock. The Murdocks lived in an imposing dark red house on Central Ave. Little Jessie Marion admired, and in later life imitated, Mrs. Murdock's every-day dramatics and great zest for life.

El Dorado of 1884 was a thriving township. Here Jessie grew up adored, spoiled, and indulged under the overprotective eyes of her doting parents. Completely dependent on her father, she had a tendency to take to her bed when events and people went against her will.

Under her parents' constant watchful eyes, Jessie was not permitted to join other children in sidewalk games or swimming or horseback riding. She remained indoors reading, drawing, or daydreaming in a secret world. She also had piano lessons and a weekly class in elocution, part of every genteel young lady's education.

The family at first attended the First Baptist Church but later joined the Presbyterian Church. They continued living in El Dorado up through their daughter's college years. Upon retirement in 1912, Dr. Koogler moved his family back to Ohio, largely to please his wife.

## ACHIEVEMENTS

Attending the first United States exhibition of modern art in 1913, Marion recalled it as the most thrilling aesthetic experience of her life, changing the course of her life. She had her first comprehensive view of the art of Cezanne, Picasso, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Degas, and Renoir, as well as works by some of the American Independents also exhibited.

A few years after the death of her beloved father, following a recent divorce, Marion suggested that she and her mother make a sentimental journey to San Antonio. The old-world atmosphere inspired Marion to take up painting again; in her new surroundings her melancholia disappeared. She made new friends, many involving the local art and literary circles. One of interest was ophthalmologist Dr. Donald Taylor Atkinson, whom she married on May 18, 1926. At this time, she began overseeing the building of Sunset Hills, a San Antonio mansion of architectural rarity and beauty, along with gardens of careful planning. The house became her creative masterpiece, perfection she could never quite achieve in her painting.

Atlee B. and Robert M. Ayres designed the house, with every detail closely scrutinized by Marion. The architects were frequently astonished and impressed by her abilities and general knowledge of technical problems. The architectural style of house was loosely termed "Mediterranean", a Spanish colonial design befitting San Antonio's sub-tropical climate and rich history.

McNay designed and cut stencils for the many ceiling and archway facings, then applied them herself, not trusting this laborious work to any other. She also became quite proficient in brick-laying and tile installation.

Her penchant for peacocks influenced both interior and exterior accents, from stencil motifs and a self-designed rug to large Talavera tile friezes made from her sketches. The rose window of San Antonio's Mission San Jose inspired a central pool in the elongated octagonal patio which the house surrounded.

For two memorable housewarming receptions attended by thousands in 1929, Marion even brought in Kansas bullfrogs from El Dorado, KS to croak happily from the patio pool as an orchestra played on the patio balcony.

McNay began her notable collection of modern art in the late 1920s with the purchase of Delfina Flores by Deigo Rivera. Later discovering the artist community of Taos, New Mexico, she began to spend part of every summer there in the company of other artists and added to her rapidly growing art collection. Here she also indulged in her fondness for colorful costumes and dramatic hats.

It was in New Mexico that she met Dalzell and Ruth Hatfield, art dealers who were to become close personal friends and a huge influence on her future art collection. Upon the early

purchase of two works of art, Ruth Hatfield recalled, "...when Marion purchased the Rousseau and the Gauguin, she already had vast knowledge of modern French and other nineteenth and twentieth century art. . . a more complete understanding of the living artists' problems."

During extended stays in Taos, she also developed deep friendships with the Pueblo Indians. She often stayed in their pueblos, even joining in tribal dances, recording their way of life in watercolors. Her Indian friends were welcome visitors to Sunset Hills. Many works by Indian artists and craftsmen joined her growing collection. When tribal lands were threatened by possible construction of dams in the middle Rio Grande, she pushed for formal protest to be filed against Congress, leading to a public hearing and defeat of the bill.

In 1946, Marion commissioned Charles Umlauf, a talented Texas sculptor, to execute a fourteen-foot aluminum crucifix on a black granite base to honor the grave of her priest, Father Basque. She had previously aided the artist by paying for two stone castings of his Christ and the Children sculpture, accepted for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Artists for Victory Exhibition during World War II. This exhibition, the artist's first national showing, marked the beginning of a highly successful career. Marion wrote a recommendation for him when he was granted a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1949.

She purchased three smaller aluminum castings by Umlauf, similar to the commissioned Crucifixion. Two of these remain in the McNay collection; the third was originally given to the Susan B. Allen Memorial Hospital in El Dorado, Kansas. Mrs. Allen had been a close friend of Marion's mother. Marion also equipped one of the operating rooms as a memorial to her father and commissioned Anthony De Young's painting of Mrs. Allen presently hanging in the hospital. Umlauf's sculpture was later moved to St. Joseph's Catholic Hospital in Wichita, KS.

During World War II, Marion learned that the Witte Museum's art school would be closed due to the war effort. She offered the use of Sunset Hills to the school, eventually establishing her own art school in the former aviary behind the house.

The San Antonio Art Institute opened in the fall of 1942. She also provided living quarters for guest instructors and directors, as well as adding her private library for the school's use. She frequently substituted as a teacher and regularly lectured to classes. Students received encouragement and critiques of their work; some were awarded prizes and scholarships to the Art Institute of Chicago.

When chronic illness caused her to live in relative seclusion, she began to make plans to leave her home to the city as a museum of Modern Art, starting with the conversion of her home into public building. She conceived, planned and perpetuated for any possible contingency, her will covering the tiniest of details in assuring the preservation and continuation of the new center of art. She left detailed instructions for how the endowment fund was to be used, as well as naming the first Board of Trustees.

Her bequest, the largest single gift in the city's history, gave San Antonio opportunity for real cultural growth, extending to an ever-widening sphere of influence to become a national treasure. Visitors, especially those from the great European art centers, continue to express amazement at such richness of modern French art in the state of Texas, often prejudged as being culturally barren.

#### AWARDS, RECOGNITION

Marion Koogler McNay is best remembered and honored by The McNay, the museum she began by her bequest to San Antonio. It continues today as one of the finest collections in the nation, now including gothic and medieval works of art, the Tobin Collection of Theatre Arts, contemporary art and modern sculpture, a research library, and the 300-seat Leeper Auditorium. Traveling exhibits are featured throughout the year.

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