

FOUR INFLUENTIAL ARTISTS



IN THE MNHS COLLECTIONS

Brian Szott

Unbeknownst to many Minnesotans, the Minnesota Historical Society has an unparalleled collection of fine art. Beginning soon after MNHS's founding in the mid-nineteenth century, the collection has grown to include more than 7,000 paintings, works on paper, sculptures, and fine-art photographs.

The collecting mission of the fine art acquisitions, like that of all MNHS's collecting areas, is to document the history of the state and the people who call Minnesota home. As history and the visual arts have evolved over the decades, so too have the acquisitions for the MNHS art collection. In addition to telling the stories of Minnesotans, the collection also documents the history of art-making in the state. This is a worthy effort; Minnesota's creative community and history distinguishes the state from most of its peers.

Thanks to the good work of my predecessor, Thomas O'Sullivan, the art collection is well grounded in excellent examples of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art. When I arrived at MNHS in 2001, my task was to build the collection through all of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. This mandate provided me with the opportunity to study and work with both living and younger Minnesota artists. The collection's growth of work by living artists was accelerated by the demographic fact that members of the baby

boom generation were downsizing to smaller homes and shedding their possessions. As any millennial will tell you, boomers have been avid accumulators. But over the last two decades, an increasing number of them were ready to find a new home for their works of art—many of which had been created by contemporary Minnesota artists.

With more than 35 years as a curator of the visual arts in Minnesota, I have not only purchased art from previous owners but I have also had the honor of working with hundreds of artists—some more closely than others. A few even became friends. Sadly, four of these artists recently passed away: Jim Denomie, Bettye Olson, Mike Lynch, and Jody Williams. They were among the most successful and respected Minnesota artists of their respective generations. It is a privilege to have known them and their work. Each contributed significantly to the story of artmaking in Minnesota, and the historical society is proud to have examples of their work in its collection.

JIM DENOMIE (1955–2022)

Jim Denomie (Ojibwe, Lac Courte Oreilles Band) died unexpectedly in March 2022. Earning a bachelor's degree in fine arts from the University of Minnesota at age 40, Jim was something of a late bloomer. At the time of his death at age 66, he was at the peak of his career, receiving national and

international acclaim, as well as numerous exhibition opportunities.

I first became acquainted with Denomie in 2012. On the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the US–Dakota War of 1862, the Minnesota Historical Society collaborated with All My Relations Arts, a Native American community organization in Minneapolis that exhibits, promotes, and supports contemporary Native artists. Together, the two organizations designed a commemorative exhibition entitled *Ded Unk'unpi (We Are Here)*. The goal of this effort was twofold: to showcase a Native American perspective on this sad event and to jump-start MNHS's collection of contemporary Native American artists, an acknowledged weakness in our art collection.

With funds provided by the Arts and Cultural Heritage Amendment, MNHS purchased work by eight contemporary Native American artists to feature in the exhibition, including Jim Denomie's iconic painting *Off the Reservation (or Minnesota Nice)*. He created this large-scale artwork specifically for the exhibition as a twenty-first century commentary on a nineteenth-century tragedy.

Denomie's talent was his unique ability to disarm the viewer through the use of color, humor, and visual metaphor. In so doing, he was able to share serious personal experiences and historical events with an uninformed and sometimes reluctant audience. Because this painting explored an alternative view of



Jim Denomie, *Off the Reservation (or Minnesota Nice)*, 2012, oil on canvas, 72 × 196". Acquisition made possible with funds provided by the Arts and Cultural Heritage Amendment.

historical events, purchasing it was a bold move on the part of MNHS.

In 2019, I had the privilege of accompanying Denomie and *Off the Reservation (or Minnesota Nice)* to São Paulo, Brazil. He had been invited to participate in the juried exhibition *Imagined Communities*, the 21st Contemporary Art Biennial. The show primarily featured work by artists from the Southern Hemisphere (Global South). Denomie was one of just a very few artists from the United States and the only Native American artist to be included in this international exhibition and associated symposium. He was something of a celebrity at the event. Like the majority of Americans,

it was not unusual for the attendees to acknowledge that their first introduction to Native American culture had been through the movie lens of “cowboy and Indian” westerns of the 1950s and 1960s. Denomie’s use of those same stereotypes and visual puns were immediately understood by the other artists and the larger Brazilian audience. Nothing was lost in translation. His imagery seamlessly transcended geographic, linguistic, and cultural borders.

Off the Reservation also played a prominent role in February 2022, when MNHS opened *Art Speaks*, an exhibition featuring permanent-collection acquisitions from the

preceding two decades. Denomie’s painting anchored the section devoted to contemporary artists. He never got to see the exhibition. Nor did he get to see all the visitors, young and old, especially school-aged children, who were so engaged with this painting.

(To read more about Jim Denomie, see Heid E. Erdrich’s November 15, 2023, essay in MNopedia at <https://www.mnopedia.org/person/denomie-jim-1955-2022>.)

BETTYE OLSON (1923–2023)

After more than eight decades of artmaking, Bettye Olson died in April 2023 at 100 years of age. Grounded in the regionalist style that dominated artmaking in Minnesota during the 1930s and 1940s, Olson was a living link between two distinct generations and artistic styles—that of representational art before WWII and the more personal approach of postwar artists. Over time, her work evolved from traditional depictions of the landscape to more expressionistic views of the natural world. Bettye was a reminder to younger artist contemporaries of their roots in twentieth-century American painting. She was an inspiration to these artists, as well. For these reasons, her paintings are an important addition to the MNHS art collection.

Olson's life and work can perhaps best be described by a lesson entitled "Perseverance Furthers," from the ancient Chinese book *I Ching*. Throughout her career, Olson never gave up. She was determined to be a professional artist, facing head-on all the societal expectations and challenges that women in general and women artists in particular experience. As a teenager, she attended art classes at Walker Art Center sponsored by the depression-era Works Progress Administration. During World War II, she continued her studies at the Stillwater Art Colony under the tutelage of well-known Minnesota artist Josephine Lutz Rollins (1896–1989). At the University of Minnesota, Olson received a degree in art education, which was considered a more "appropriate" option for women of her generation.

While balancing her roles as a wife, mother, and working artist, Olson cofounded the West Lake Gallery in the Twin Cities in the mid-

1960s. It operated for nearly 20 years. Although the gallery did not show women artists exclusively, it was a woman-centered artist cooperative. The gallery was run by women and its members were women. This groundbreaking venture began a full decade before the Women's Art Registry of Minnesota (WARM) was established.

I remember first meeting Olson in 2009, after walking up many flights of concrete steps to her jam-packed studio in a warehouse on University Avenue in St. Paul. Breathless, I wondered how Olson, well into her 80s at the time, did this on a routine basis. In 2015, Olson and I worked together on her retrospective exhibition, *By These Hands*. Shortly after that, she was the subject of a biography titled *Persistence of Vision: The Art of Bettye Olson*, by authors Julie L'Enfant and Jaden Hansen. Olson was thrilled to receive recognition for her contribution to Minnesota art that she so richly deserved.

MIKE LYNCH (1938–2023)

In September 2023, Minnesota lost a dominant and influential figure in the Twin Cities contemporary art scene. Mike Lynch came upon his signature style early in his career and perfected it in the decades that followed. The result was a large body of work that was frequently exhibited throughout the region. From landscapes to still lifes, his chosen subject matter is well known to Minnesotans. His industrial and commercial landscapes from the Iron Range, Duluth–Superior, and Minneapolis—meticulously rendered in dark, nuanced colors—evoke moody yet familiar settings that work like a faded memory. His unpopulated scenes of grain elevators, train yards, street corners, and backyards are regularly depicted in the stillness of the evening, giving them a dreamy and

lonely quality. It seems that no one understood the importance of place better than Lynch. When the weather did not permit him to paint outdoors, he created still lifes in his studio. His work included common objects such as rusty toys, bottles, boots, and even duck decoys. His still lifes were executed with the same precision as his landscapes.

Born in Hibbing, Minnesota, Lynch was identified as a teenage prodigy in the 1950s by a Duluth newspaper. He attended Hibbing High School just a few years before fellow Hibbing resident Bob Zimmerman (aka Bob Dylan). Lynch went on to study at the Grand Marais Art Colony with founder Birney Quick. He later attended the Minneapolis College of Art and Design (MCAD) and studied briefly in Europe at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

After moving to Minneapolis in the 1970s, Lynch established himself as the preeminent painter of the Minnesota urban landscape, earning critical acclaim, commissions, and numerous awards. Considered by some to be the last great Minnesota regionalist painter, Lynch continued a tradition advanced by midcentury Minnesotans such as Dewey Albinson, Eric Austen Erickson, and Clement Haupers.

Ever present in the local art scene, Lynch shunned the limelight. Once given the opportunity to discuss his work to a group of my MCAD students in the 1990s, Mike chose to bring in a custom-built easel that he used to paint from the driver's seat of his car. He reasoned that this would be far more beneficial to young artists than anything he could possibly say about his personal approach to artmaking.

In 2019, the Minnesota Historical Society seized the opportunity to purchase Lynch's manuscript archive spanning nearly his entire



Bettye Olson, *Lillies Reaching*, 1980, acrylic on canvas, 42 × 148"

70-year career and consisting of more than two dozen journals, nearly 90 sketchbooks, prints, business records, family scrapbooks, and childhood drawings. Such material is rarely found in the studios of artists. This treasure trove provides incredible insight into Lynch's genius. The journals and sketchbooks reveal his working process, his visual problem-solving, and the everyday challenges of a working artist. Lynch was particularly interested in the science of artmaking. This ranged from light

and perspective studies to color-formulation experiments with mineral deposits from the Iron Range and with sap from indigenous trees. Upon viewing the journals filled with notations, maps, and thumbnail drawings, a friend remarked to me, "Lynch is the Leonardo da Vinci of Minnesota!"

Before 2019, the Minnesota Historical Society possessed a modest manuscript collection of artists' papers by painters such as Cameron Booth and Elof Wedin, but nothing as comprehensive and simply as-

tounding as the Lynch material. This significant MNHS acquisition was made possible through the financial generosity of Ken and Nina Rothchild. What's even more exciting about this acquisition is its accessibility. The general public can personally view elements of the Mike Lynch manuscript collection by scheduling a visit to the Gale Family Library at the Minnesota History Center.



Mike Lynch, *Untitled (29th and Harriet)*, c. 1980, oil on linen, 32 x 144".

Pages from the Mike Lynch manuscript archive. Acquisition made possible by a generous gift from Ken and Nina Rothchild and the Roger Preuss endowment fund.



JODY WILLIAMS (1956-2023)

If Jim Denomie found his greatest success by going large, then the teacher, printmaker, and book artist Jody Williams found her success by going small . . . very small. Born in Illinois, Williams settled in Minneapolis after receiving degrees from Carleton College and the Rochester Institute of Technology. I first met Williams in the 1990s at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. Together, we organized a print exhibition titled *Cuts, Bites, and Scratches*. Williams loved that title and would often remind me so over the years.

Combining text, drawings, and illustrations with items such as seeds, sand, and rocks in specimen bottles, Williams is best known for her small-scale, handcrafted artist's books. Attributing her lifelong compulsion to collect, organize, and contain tiny objects to a chaotic childhood, Williams created idiosyncratic and complex books in exacting detail. While the subject of each book varied greatly, her interest in the natural

world, science, and the quirkiness of the human condition were constant themes. Perhaps because of its tiny scale and intimacy, Williams's work is playful and life affirming. Her books make me smile.

The Gale Family Library at the Minnesota History Center has all 19 editioned works by Williams in its superb collection of artists' books, assembled by veteran acquisitions librarian Patrick Coleman. About Williams, Coleman says, "While MNHS tried to acquire all work by Minnesota book artists, it was a special pleasure and a significant acquisition when a new work by Jody came in. Her exquisite books are flawlessly crafted and offer a unique perspective on the world. Through all her Flying Paper Press works, Jody modeled what 'fine press' truly meant. She taught us all to look for beauty in nature's smallest objects."

(To read more about Jody Williams, visit "Jody Williams: A Remembrance," by artist and former student of Williams Benjamin Merritt in a February 7, 2024, posting at [\[.mplsart.com/written/2024/02/jody-williams-a-remembrance\]\(https://www.mplsart.com/written/2024/02/jody-williams-a-remembrance\).\)](https://www</p></div><div data-bbox=)

*"We all shine on, like the moon,
the stars, and the sun . . ."*

—John Lennon

I like to think of all artmaking in Minnesota as a galaxy. Some stars, or artists, are older, some newer. Some burn hot while others are cooler. Collectively, Minnesota art possesses a similar energy, beauty, and diversity to the stars in space. Like their celestial counterparts in our corner of the universe, these four artists each emitted a light that will continue to shine long after the source has extinguished. While Jim Denomie, Bettye Olson, Mike Lynch, and Jody Williams are missed by friends, family, and loved ones, their unique contributions and legacy can be found in the permanent collection of the Minnesota Historical Society now and long into the future. ▣

All images are from MNHS collections.



Jody Williams, *For Now*, 2018, mixed media, closed: 2.75 × 2 × 2", opened: 2.75 × 10", edition of 44



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society, and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or users or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission: [contact us](#).

Individuals may print or download articles for personal use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#). Include the author's name and article title in the body of your message. But first--

If you think you may need permission, here are some guidelines:

Students and researchers

- You **do not** need permission to quote or paraphrase portions of an article, as long as your work falls within the fair use provision of copyright law. Using information from an article to develop an argument is fair use. Quoting brief pieces of text in an unpublished paper or thesis is fair use. Even quoting in a work to be published can be fair use, depending on the amount quoted. Read about fair use here: <http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html>
- You **should**, however, always credit the article as a source for your work.

Teachers

- You **do not** need permission to incorporate parts of an article into a lesson.
- You **do** need permission to assign an article, either by downloading multiple copies or by sending students to the online pdf. There is a small per-copy use fee for assigned reading. [Contact us](#) for more information.

About Illustrations

- **Minnesota History** credits the sources for illustrations at the end of each article. **Minnesota History** itself does not hold copyright on images and therefore cannot grant permission to reproduce them.
- For information on using illustrations owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, see [MHS Library FAQ](#).