

# The Journal

October 16, 2013

Section 1A

## Artist depicted daily routines of life

Self taught at age 60 artist's work shows community values, way of life

**By: Phillip Martin**  
**Staff Writer**

MATTIE LOU O'KELLEY spent most of her life in Maysville, Georgia, much of it on a farm. Entirely self-taught, she only began painting steadily at the age of sixty when, in poor health and unable to work, she ordered paints and canvas from the Sears, Roebuck catalog and began bartering her artwork for goods. Her paintings were discovered in the museum shop at Atlanta's High Museum by Dr. Robert Bishop, and now hang in permanent collections here and abroad.

Ms. O'Kelley used no easel for painting. Instead, she painted with the canvas laid flat on the top of a desk, giving every work an unremittingly common perspective – looking from a distance slightly downward.

Emily Mattie Lou O'Kelley was born March 30, 1908, in Maysville, the seventh of eight children of a farmer and his wife. The family's 129-acre farm produced cotton, corn and hay. As a child, she picked cotton, canned vegetables, made quilts and watered the livestock. At the end of the workday, the family retired to the front porch, where her mother read aloud that day's comics in The



1983

Cotton Ginning Time

Atlanta Constitution. "I was raised on the Katzenjammer Kids, Winnie Winkle and Mutt 'n' Jeff", Ms. O'Kelley once recalled.

She left Homer High School after the ninth grade. The family land was sold and she moved to the town of Maysville. She sewed work clothes, worked as a cook and waitress in the school cafeteria, and made mop yarn at a mill. At 50 she was forced to quit working, and at 54 she took up painting as a hobby. She sold her earliest canvasses at the Maysville Autumn Leaf Festival.



O'Kelley

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Artists in Georgia show at the High Museum in Atlanta. “I wanted to get into that show, so I took my paintings down to Mr. Gudmund Vigtel,” then director of the museum, she recalled later. “He said she couldn’t be in the show because it was for modern art and I was a folk artist. It was the first time I knew I was a folk artist.”

Mr. Vigtel was unable to display her works in the museum at the time, but he permitted them to be hung in the museum gift shop. It was there that Mr. Bishop spotted them when lecturing in Atlanta. “Here was a true American primitive – self-taught, an exquisite recorder of time and place and, most compelling of all, an artist capable of rich detail and a variety of design and texture indicating a unique vision.” “She will be known in future generations as a major American artist. Her art will be collected, avidly collected, respected and exhibited for as long as there’s an America,” said the late Robert Bishop, a folk art authority who was director of publications for the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village in Michigan when he discovered Ms. O’Kelley and later was director of the American Museum of Folk Art in New York.

A painting by Ms. O’Kelley of a yellow cat was published on the cover of Life magazine



Leviton Atlanta

in June 1980 and a “major Southern corporation” awarded Ms. O’Kelley a multi-painting commission in the 1980s. Twenty-four of her works that belonged to retired chairman and CEO of Georgia-Pacific, T. Marshall Hahn Jr. were displayed in 1990 in the downtown High Museum of Art, which is in the Georgia-Pacific Building.

Mr. Hahn became aware of Ms. O’Kelley shortly after he moved Georgia-Pacific’s headquarters to Atlanta in the early 1980s. Already a folk art collector, Mr. Hahn saw some of her work at the High Museum of Art. He tried to find her work through local art dealers, but she had cut off all relationships. After several attempts, he finally got her phone number. He asked if she had any paintings for sale. Ms. O’Kelley told him that she would only sell them to someone who would back her book, *Moving to Town*. Mr. Hahn agreed to buy all 24 paintings for the book. Mr. Hahn owns Ms. O’Kelley’s first and last works. The first effort is a crayon drawing of a cabin, done in 1967. The final piece is a countryside scene painted in 1996. In 1990 one of her paintings was auctioned at Sotheby’s for \$416,000.

Ms. O’Kelley died July 26, 1997 at the age of 89.

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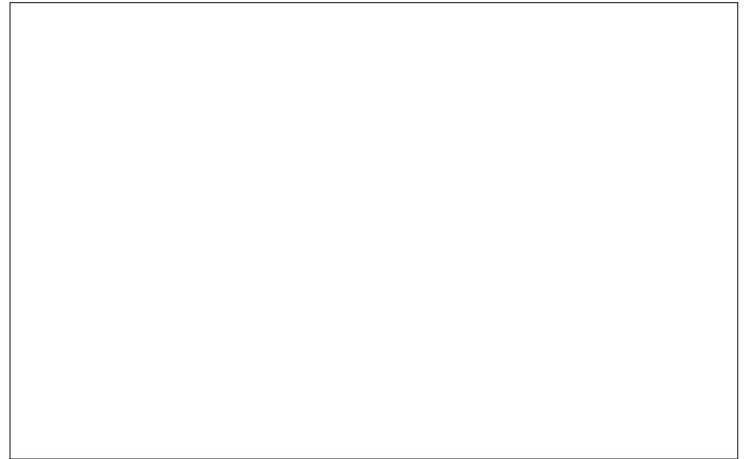
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