

**You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.**

**SFX: BUZZ**

**MARY: These machines haven't changed a whole lot in their construction since 1891 since invented (FADE UNDER)**

**It's early in the morning – at least early for a tattoo parlor, where people don't show up until the afternoon.**

**Mary Joy Scott is showing me around her equipment at Ed Hardy's Tattoo City in San Francisco. Mary is a big deal in the world of tattoo art but I was not there to get a tattoo. I wanted to talk about her craft because one of the artists that she's really inspired by is Margaret Brundage.**

**And if you haven't heard of Margaret Brundage, don't worry. Most people haven't.**

**In the 1930s, Brundage drew covers for a pulp fiction magazine called Weird Tales. Pulp fiction is usually thought of as hard boiled detective stories. But Weird Tales specialized in fantasy and horror stories by writers like H.P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard – who I talked about in my last episode. And the covers that Margaret Brundage drew for the magazine were just as iconic.**

**MARY: They're just so beautifully rendered they have such an inner life more so than some pulp illustrations that I've seen.**

**The most famous Brundage illustration has a woman alone on the cover. She's wearing a black sleeveless top. Her arms are raised with the back of her palms against her cheeks. And she's wearing basically a Batgirl cowl with an actual bat spreading its wings on top. This is seven years before Batman came out.**

**But a typical Brundage cover has a woman who was scantily clad or completely naked. And there's a sinister figure lurking over her. It could be a giant wolf, an old witch, a demon with wings, an evil swami – or another woman in a position of domination. Sometimes the main female figure looks terrified, sometimes she's reaching out to this otherworldly element. And sometimes she's too lost in her own thoughts to notice what's happening around her.**

MARY: So I look at her work to see how she arranges the figures together with one another. And I looked at her faces a lot because she knows how to simplify a face to give you maximum motion and readability from far away which you need on a cover right. You need that on a tattoo. You want to be able to see what's going on several feet away and her and a pulp cover gives you that feeling it gives you it gives you a lot of information from far away. And then when you get in you get to enjoy all the details but it's got to have a visual a strong visual impact. So she uses great contrast -- she uses great interaction between figures

***And when you say arrange or figure what does that mean?***

MARY: Say I have a back piece I'm working on and I have to put two different figures on that on the back. I have to arrange them together with one another in a in a way that will fit on the back that will be readable because it's really like working on a vase or something it's not a flat piece of paper it's a living breathing rounded person that I'm working on. But that visual impact is really important. So things like movie posters Pulp Fiction covers these are excellent sources of inspiration and great reference for tattooer.

**Mary thinks this connection between Brundage and tattoo art goes back to one particular tattoo artist -- a pioneer in the art of tattoos named Ralph Johnstone.**

MARY: This is a book of photocopies of Ralph Johnstone's work. I feel conined that he looked at a lot of Margaret Brundage covers and incorpoated them into his work.

**During the Depression, Johnstone's tattoo parlor was not far from the office of Weird Tales in Chicago. He probably saw Brundage's covers. They were hard to miss back then.**

**So Mary was showing me a book of Ralph Johnstone's work....**

***Oh look at that.***

MARY: This is the image that I thought looks exactly like a Margaret Brundage.

***Hmmmm. How would you describe it?***

MARY: So this image is a woman in a cat costume with claws. Well you know long nails and she's creeping with her arm up and her, she's sort of like a little cat burglar but she's wearing a half shirt with a headdress that sort of looks like it's all connected ---

***Like a panther almost.***

MARY: With a panther, a black panther on top of her head but she is fully embodying the sort of slinky black cat spirit creeping through the hallway. But yeah it looks like a Margaret Brundage.

***Yeah that was my first thought, yeah it does.***

**We don't know a lot about Margaret Brundage's life. George Hagenauer (HAY-gen-hour) is one of the few scholars who's done research about her. And the first time he came across her work – he was not at an art gallery.**

GEORGE: God I probably first saw Margaret Brundage his work in the window of a skid row bookstore on the North Side of Chicago. He would always have Weird Tales in the front window at the Brundage covers because the Skid Row area had a burlesque house across the street. So I was sitting there buying nickel comic books and underneath in the file drawers were original pastels but I never realized that at the time.

**In the '70s and '80s, only a handful of collectors recognized these illustrations as being works of art.**

**Now they're auctioned for thousands of dollars, and we can see that she had a big influence not just on commercial illustration, or tattoo art – but the development of science fiction, horror and fantasy as genres. So who was she, and how did she end up being so important?**

**We'll find out in just a moment.**

**BREAK**

**The life of Margaret Brundage was not a complete mystery. We know that she spent most of her life Chicago. Her father died when she was eight. She was raised by her mother. You know in old pictures people can look like they couldn't only exist era? Well, she looks like someone I could see walking down the street in my neighborhood right now with her short black hair with a ponytail up in the back, dark mascara and dark lipstick.**

**But she was definitely a woman of her time. In fact, she went to high school with Walt Disney.**

LAUREN: She actually notoriously denies his illustrations for the school newspaper which she was editor of.

**Lauren Stump works for the Korshak collection, which owns a few Brundage pieces. Lauren says, Brundage actually turned down Disney's artwork a few times for the high school paper – but no hard feelings.**

LAUREN: They did have a relationship, she reaches out to him in the '40s looking for work at his animation studio and I think he's working on Cinderella and says this is more simple than what you're able to give us, please come out, let's talk. So they were friendly and they knew of each other but they never really worked together after high school.

**Brundage didn't want to work for Disney because she had deep roots in Chicago. After high school, went to the Art Institute of Chicago to study fashion illustration. And she got sucked into the scene at a speakeasy slash artist salon called The Dil Pickle Club.**

STEVE: The Dil Pickle was an intersection of Chicago avant garde with political activism.

**Steve Korshak runs the Korshak Collection, which focuses on early sci-fi and fantasy illustrators.**

STEVE: There were hobos and Wobblies and Marxist. It was a time of a turbulent time just before the depression of burlesque houses in cabarets and nightclubs. It was a time of free expression. There were nude nude dancers. There were different things going on there were discussions of free love all of these things Margaret was exposed to, as well as being married to a womanizer.

**That womanizer was Slim. She met him at the club. They would get into deep conversations about politics and art, and when she got pregnant, they had a shotgun wedding. The marriage lasted about a decade but Slim never fully committed to it.**

STEVE: Slim Brundage would disappear for a month or two at a time and Margaret would know where he was. And so Margaret moved out and she moved in with her mother, the Christian scientist practitioner who had fallen down and broken her hip but of course refused to have treated being a Christian Science practitioner.

**So Brundage is basically a single mother, and caring for her own mother. She needed money -- ASAP. She picks up gigs doing fashion illustration. And then she walks over to the office of Weird Tales magazine.**

**When I was researching Weird Tales for my last episode on Conan the Barbarian, I got a negative impression of the publisher, Farnsworth Wright. He seemed like a schyster who kept short changed his writers. But Lauren says, Brundage brought**

**out a different side of Farnsworth Wright. She could walk the line between being very feminine, and being like one of the boys.**

LAUREN: And the way that Margaret describes Farnsworth, he's tall and childlike, always grinning, quick with an off humor joke, risqué story, she was a woman with background in Dil Pickle Club, so I think that she was able to come back with quick comeback and really develop this strong relationship with him.

**He put Brundage to work on a side publication called "Oriental Stories." Yeah, pulp fiction was not exactly known for racial sensitivity back then, to put it mildly. But they paid well. She made \$90 a cover, which would be \$1700 today. And Farnsworth Wright couldn't get enough of her covers.**

LAUREN: Farnsworth really starts picking out these nude covers, the more scantily clad women the better, and Brundage supplies him with the content he's more interested in and publishing but the authors get quick to this. They're like, okay, if I include a piece of my story to have a women in no clothing draped over a wheel or bound or if I include those snippets that Brundage is going to pick up on then it's more likely for my story to make the cover.

***Well what about she faced criticism some authors like Lovecraft who were not a fan of these covers because thought they distracted from the stories and some of the readers felt that way to. Do you think that's a legitimate criticism?***

LAUREN: I can understand the criticism, I don't think it necessarily adds to the story to have this out of left field naked woman appearing, so yeah, I think that's 100% legitimate.

**But some of the writers didn't feel that way. Robert E. Howard really liked the illustrations she did for his Conan stories. In one of the few interviews she gave later in life, she said Howard was her favorite author, and she was devastated when he committed suicide.**

**In fact, George Hagenauer told me something that really surprised me:**

GEORGE: The model the original model for Conan the Barbarian when he first appears on Weird Tales covers is her husband Slim, if you look at pencil drawings of Slim during the period that Conan is appearing on the cover the hairdo and all that stuff and the shape of her face is real similar to Conan.

**One of the reasons why Brundage's work was so unique was because she painted with pastels. Most magazine illustrations back then were painted with acrylics or oils.**

**Usually pastels are used for bucolic scenes of farms, or sunsets, but she used pastels to give the flesh of her female figures a soft texture, with a lot of vibrancy. She couldn't afford to buy full sets of pastels, so she used a lot of basic colors, which made her female figures pop out against the backgrounds, that were electric blue, blood red, velvet green or firely yellow.**

**Again, Steve Korshak.**

STEVE: We have exhibitions of fantasy illustrators and many times a lot of the women will come over during the exhibition and tell me that their favorite illustrator is actually Margaret Brundidge and I would say to them gee that's interesting. I always thought of frontages work as being kind of sexual and they would tell me no. Margaret's work is sensual the pastels and the chocks give it a rich vibrant sensual feeling.

**One of the things that really draws Lauren Stump to Brundage's art is the ambiguity of the female figures.**

LAUREN: There's something about the women she portrays, where you're not sure if they're victims or not. They're almost like they're participating in this really interesting way, they're going to be bound but they're not scared, they're going to be involved but not as this complete damsel.

**Although the artist Mary Joy Scott thinks it's very powerful to see how often Brundage's female figures look they're in danger.**

MARY: Women have been over time victims of a lot of violent crime and we know that. So there's something in me that I that I recognize that that sort of fear. And I find it in some way that is that's an essential component to the female Hero's Journey. You have to descend into the darkness in order to understand that you might survive it.

***Yeah or what do you think about the fight I mean the Brundidge the women the Brunner's covers are either completely naked or mostly half naked or mostly naked. Do you think that adds to the sense of vulnerability as well to those to the women those covers.***

MARY: Nakedness is that it's again that's the archetypal symbol for being laid bare at your most essential states. And it's also you know getting to that basic experience and that fear in the dark.

LAUREN: I think that Brundage is modeled in a lot of her actresses, and a lot of her characters are someone she recognizes in herself or her peers and I think that's real and it's something that men depicting a woman, it doesn't work as well. She's interjecting this real sensuality and real... (breath).. presence into her illustrations that you just don't really get with other contemporary illustrations so I think that's why I'm so drawn to it.

**Mary says this is an issue we're dealing with right now -- how women are depicted in fantasy illustrations or movie posters or comic book covers.**

MARY: There's something about the way that a woman will depict a beautiful woman that sometimes is a little different. There's an inner life to the woman and she's not just she's not just tits and ass on a plate. She's got she's doing something and her spirit is sort of moving her. And yet she's very beautiful.

***Yeah well I think also a lot of these pictures when they're drawn are painted by men. The women are very aware that they're being looked at by the male viewer and. And they have. And they look at point they look back like saying you know almost to say like well I'm here for you and her women are completely unaware that they're being observed by you. They're on a journey.***

MARY: I think that that I think you hit the nail on the head. I think that's what it is because they really are participants in the scene they're fully immersed in the scene.

**But in the 1930s, readers of Weird Tales didn't always see it that way. The magazine got tons of complaints about her racy covers.**

**Weird Tales was in a strange position. It published horror but it was not as schlocky as other horror magazines. It was edgier than a typical sci-fi magazine – where by the way, women rarely appeared on the covers, they were all rocket ships and bug-eyed monsters.**

**George Hagenauer says the pictures Brundage created were not that far from the sex pulps at the time, but Weird Tales had serious literary ambitions.**

GEORGE: That's part of the reason why you have the complaints, there were people who realize that the writing and Weird Tales is far better than a large chunk of the writing that was available in your average fiction magazine. And they then would get somewhat shocked when they would have like you know a scantily clad women on the cover making love to a stand and you know in a pagan statue or bondage type of

situation you know. Because that even though that was part of the stories they didn't want the visual on the cover.

**Now she signed her work, "M. Brundage." Most people thought M stood for a male name. So Farnsworth Wright saw an opportunity for a media sensation when he revealed that M stood for Margaret.**

LAUREN: Yeah, he reveals that it's Margaret and people gasp. Oh my God, a woman did this?! And there was so much speculation about who this woman would be and what kind of woman she was and how could a woman do this? And even though men have been doing it forever so there was a backlash to her being a woman portraying this hyper sexualized erotic art.

**Brundage shrugged off the controversy, but the backlash caught up with her. In 1938, the magazine moved to New York for financial reasons but at the same time, the mayor of New York, Fiorello LaGuardia, created decency laws that prohibited racy covers on magazines. Werid Tales did have two other popular illustrators, Hannes Bok and Virgil Finley, who were not controversial.**

**On top of that, Brundage had a terrible time getting her newly santized artwork to New York because her pastels were so delicate. Farnsworth Wright used to joke that he was afraid to even sneeze around them because they might disintegrate. Even today, Steve Korshak struggles with that issue when he shows her work.**

STEVE: We did an exhibition at the Society of Illustrators in New York and I was so nervous about it. I took them in my car and drove them up to New York and then flew back to Florida. And when I picked them up I flew to New York and then drove them back.

**This is the point where Margaret Brundage falls off the radar. In the 1960s, she re-emerges at art fairs, but doesn't sell much. In 1972, her son dies, possibly of a drug or alcohol overdose. Most of her belongings were destroyed in a fire – including her correspondences, which is why we know much about her life. She dies in 1976 with very little money.**

**Steve Korshak has been leading the way in making an argument that she deserves the respect of an artist, not just a magazine illustrator.**

STEVE: For a long time people didn't consider illustrators to be artists because they worked for a commercial purpose. They weren't like Van Gogh and they didn't go to

Polynesia and bite off Gaughan's ear. They were entrepreneurs. That's not what an artist is supposed to be. So maybe the fact that we've overlooked that for so long and thought that you can't be that person and still be an artist maybe our assumptions are wrong.

**George Hagenauer thinks the genres of fantasy and horror actually took a leap into the public's consciousness because of her illustrations.**

GEORGE: What's sort of important is to realize that Weird Tales didn't survive Lovecraft and actually a lot of this type of genre which became very popular again in the 1960s wouldn't even have existed because that was basically how these writers got the money to live. And I don't think weird tales would have made it through the 30s without Margaret Brundidge. I mean if you look at weird tales in the late '20s and prior to Margaret Brundidge if you go to collectors meetings that early stuff is really expensive because there wasn't much of it. And the magazine was continually tottering on the point of falling apart. Once you get into the 30s and you get Brundidge is a cover artist suddenly we tales as becomes viable. And there are any number of people who tried to compete with weird tales who folded in the 20s and 30s. Strange story strange tales a lot of these group magazine tales a magical mystery quite often had Lovecraft had. Howard had a lot of these other people running for him that didn't survive weird tales did. And that was the editorial. But it was the editorial was savvy enough to put Margaret Brundidge on the cover.

**Typically that's the end of her story. But George has one other point he wants to make.**

**Brundage may have disappeared from the art scene, but she didn't disappear. She got a job working at the Southside Community Art Center in Chicago, which began as a WPA project dedicated by Eleanor Roosevelt. A lot of important African-American artists worked at that community center, like Gordon Parks and Margaret Taylor-Burroughs.**

GEORGE: And so she gets down there, gets involved first as an instructor ultimately becomes president of the board and works there in some fashion or another for -- I don't know five six eight nine years. And that becomes her life. You know she's doing art but she's doing it in the context it's also important to her which is social change and changing people's lives and one it's a steady paycheck. It's not freelance work. So she basically has a lot of freedom in her choice and is not to pursue freelance work but rather to go more on the fine arts realm but especially in this work of using the arts to transform the near Southside black community. So she played a very key role in that for

quite a while until the early '50s the early '50s her, Margaret Burroughs and her husband and a number of people basically had to leave the board because of the McCarthy hearings and a lot of the HUAC stuff that's you know the stuff that's going against people who have any ties to the radical parts of American political spectrum and so people like Margaret Brundage, Margaret Burroughs and her husband literally left the country to be safe so they went down to Mexico for four or five or six years. You know they all left because they realize that if they got targeted the center would have serious problems.

**Remember, she could've made more money if she moved her family to L.A. and worked for Disney. She could've also moved to New York, toned down her style and gotten steady work at Weird Tales and other magazines. But she didn't want to leave Chicago.**

**Yet here she is in the 1950s, moving to another country so the Southside Community Art Center could go on during the Red Scare without any controversy. She's often described as a tragic figure or a forgotten one. To me, this is heroic.**

GEORGE: Yeah I mean I think the major problem understanding Brundage is what little exists on her was all done from the fan perspective. So as well what did he do in science fiction? What did you do, you know you know what artwork did you do. Who did you know on the field for Margaret. That's really part of her life but probably even almost a secondary prior real life compared to the bigger issues which is how do you improve society. You know working at the Southside Community Arts Center the first three years they worked with like 50000 kids and adults who were living in poverty whose only access to the arts were that center. So you compare that to doing like a cover for fantastic adventures. There's no comparison, I think.

**What makes a good life? Is it how our life is perceived, or how we experience it? She put love into her family, her work, and her community. Her family had a lot of heartbreak. Work was stop and go. But building a community that lasts? That's an art unto itself.**

**Well that is it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Mary Joy Scott, Lauren Stump, Steve Korshak and George Hagenauer.**

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