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in full bloom



At 97, artist Phyllis Silverman shares her remarkable story – call it a design for life – in anticipation of a weekend exhibit at Corea Seaside Grange



Artist Phyllis Silverman (above), the 97-year-old Down East doyenne, seems to blend into the background of her beloved Corea. One of her creations, "My Chinese Ancestor" (top), is a multimedia collage in which Silverman combined cut paper with her painting. Her work will be on display at the Corea Seaside Grange on Saturday.

BY BETH PARKS
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

The shoes are size 5, but it takes a giant to fill them. At age 97, Phyllis Silverman is a force of nature and an object of awe in the tiny seaside village of Corea.

About 14 years ago I noticed a tiny woman in a broad hat climbing gingerly on the pink granite ledges in front of my house on her way to the beach. Afraid that she would fall and hurt herself, I called out and asked her to walk across my lawn. "I don't want to disturb you," she called back. "Considerate," I said to myself. "Now, THAT'S the kind of person I wouldn't mind disturbing me."

She introduced herself as Phyllis Silverman and told me

that her cousin, Barry Canner, and his partner owned the Black Duck bed and breakfast across the harbor from my house on Crowley Island. She intended to spend her summers in a tiny cottage just across the road from the B&B.

After that I would see her often, picking her way across the rocks or strolling along one of the few roads in the village or on the island. There was no mistaking the broad hats or the tiny feet, or the confidence so evident in her stride.

The years slid by, but I never really got to know her. Early this summer she stopped by the house that my cousins were renovating across the harbor on Cranberry Point. Before I could caution her about the steep stairs, she scaled them and gleefully exclaimed, "Oh,

what a magnificent view! That's my little cottage right over there!" She radiated a joy of Corea that made my heart sing.

And still, I did not sit with her to talk.

As I was preparing materials for "The Tradition Continues: Artists of Corea Studio Tour" that takes place this Saturday at Seaside Grange, someone mentioned that Phyllis would be exhibiting some of her artwork. I had no idea that she painted. In fact, I realized I knew practically nothing about her at all.

And so began one of the most fascinating visits I've ever had with anyone. She welcomed me into her cottage, plied me with huge blueberries that veritably exploded with flavor, and shared how she

came to be painting in Corea.

Phyllis Green was born in 1910, the only child of a Boston shoe jobber who had settled in Spokane, Washington, after a failed search for gold in the West. He had written to his girlfriend back in Boston saying, "Come on out and we'll get married." The girl went, but her mother "gave her money to come home if she didn't love Harry."

The couple did, in fact, marry and returned to Boston when Phyllis' mother was pregnant. "I got plenty of attention and love," Phyllis recalls with obvious pride. "My father was one of nine children, and I was the first grandchild. My grandparents and aunts and uncles said 'Wonderful!' about everything I did."

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The young Phyllis had a flare for art. In 1928, when most young women generally had a choice of becoming a nurse, secretary, teacher or housewife, she chose to go to Vesper George Art School after graduating from Brookline High. That winter she met Matty Silverman, the man who would become her husband six years later.

Phyllis' friend Bob Ehrlich had set up a blind date for her with his cousin, Buster, who was a first-year student at Harvard Law School. Phyllis wore a leopard coat to his apartment in Cambridge. "Imagine doing that today!" she exclaims.

At the apartment she found Buster and his roommate, Matty, concocting a batch of bathtub gin. "Matty got horribly sick," she recalls. "I felt so sorry for him that I spent the entire evening applying cold compresses to his forehead."

Buster and Matty were so impressed with Phyllis that they both wanted to date her, and Bob asked her which one she liked best. "Matty," she answered, without hesitation. But Buster refused to back down. He cut cards for her and won. "Buster was so handsome and rich," she went on. "He went everywhere in tails, and I always pinned a gardenia or carnation on his lapel before he went out."

"But everything is fair in love and war," she continues, her blue eyes gleaming. "Matty called and asked me for a date, and I accepted. Buster wouldn't talk to him for the remainder of law school, and they were never close even after that."

"I was madly in love with Matty," she adds, with an emphasis that lets you know she really means it. When I ask her why, she responds, "I think it was because he never offended me."

Meanwhile, the Great Depression had descended upon Boston and the rest of the country. "I was living at home and learned to earn money," Phyllis recalls. My mother was very talented and could sew, but she wouldn't give me any cash. She had me painting handkerchiefs to sell. And she wouldn't buy any dresses for me. She'd tell me to go into downtown Boston and paint a picture of what I liked so she could make it."



Still filled with awe and excitement at 97, Phyllis Silverman finds her world invigorating. Her selected paintings and collages will be on display at the Seaside Grange in Corea from 10 to 4 on Saturday, Aug. 18.

"From then on I always did something to make a living," Phyllis maintains, resting her hand-decorated size 5 shoes on a weathered lobster crate. "I painted designs on window shields, which let the air in the windows but kept you from falling out. I painted them like window boxes. I got \$4 each for flowers like a tulip or an iris."

Matty received his degree from Harvard Law School, and the two were married in 1934. "I was 24," she remembers. "In those days it meant I was in danger of becoming an old maid."

The couple moved to Washington, D.C., then to New York where they settled in Bayside, a neighborhood in the borough of Queens, and lived there until 1960. Daughter Peg was born in 1938 and later became a stage and screen actress. Son Steven, born in 1940, went on to become a cameraman and filmmaker.

"I found New York liberating," Phyllis declares, her eyes flashing. "It was just the opposite of Boston. There were no taboos. I was into politics and active in the American Labor Party when our kids were growing up. I was always picketing and interviewing potential new members. I was also involved with Women's Strike for Peace."

In addition to her zeal for politics, Phyllis' passion for art

flourished. At age 50 she became a textile designer for Pattern & Print. "I liked it because they paid me for my designs and I never had to peddle my own stuff," she says. When she and Matty moved into a duplex apartment in a brownstone near the United Nations in 1960, she opened her own small studio there. "I asked Lily Furst to be my agent, and she agreed. She sold my designs to anybody who expressed interest."

Continuing in her self-deprecating, what's-the-big-deal manner, Phyllis pooh-poos the importance of having her designs on fabrics, linens, paper dresses and wallpaper sold through upscale stores such as Bloomingdales. Her portfolio, which she despises sharing, contains articles about and advertisements of her work during the 1960s and '70s. A cover of Seventeen magazine jumps out at you, as does Phyllis' picture as an up-and-coming designer in The New York Times.

One of the articles in Phyllis' collection is a feature that House & Garden magazine did about "Summer Wheat," a design she created for Martex. It includes a color photo of her and Matty in a big bed covered with linen in the "Summer Wheat" pattern. "They took over our apartment and did

everything in that awful design," she says, grimacing. "The chairs, the couch, everything! We hated it. They gave us enough sheets to last us a lifetime."

Despite her success as a designer, neither Phyllis nor Matty considered it a big deal. "We were in the Caribbean one time when Matty saw a worker in a housedress," she relates. "He just roared. 'My Lord, Phyllis, there's one of your patterns!' It was just some horrible design I'd sold."

"Matty was the kingpin in his family," Phyllis confides. "He really didn't relish his independence. I had always been a bit timid and said yes to everything, but then I went to therapy to try to resolve some of the issues I was having with my mother. I started speaking my mind and demanding my rights. I was really pleased with my progress, but after my therapy Matty said, 'I liked you better before.'"

Phyllis lost Matty to multiple sclerosis when he was 80. Despite being diagnosed at age 32, he had gone on to specialize in labor law and to establish his own firm. Angina plagued him in his later years, but it was the MS that confined him to a hospital bed in their apartment for the final two years of his life.

"I don't think Matty minded

dying," Phyllis muses. "He had a wife who loved him and was with him all the time, and he was getting wonderful care. I wouldn't mind dying either if I could be surrounded by people who loved me."

"I went back to work shortly after Matty died," she continues, excitement creeping into her voice. "I saw an ad about a children's museum in SoHo and decided to go down and ask if I could volunteer. There were paintings about war on the window, done by children from all over the world. They took me on, and my job was to catalog the various pictures. It was marvelous. I was surrounded by young people, and it was the beginning of a whole new life for me."

Even so, she continued to stay in the old Brownstone that she and Matty shared for so many years. Even today she lives in that same walkup duplex on the fourth and fifth floors.

Phyllis' interest in art never faltered. She bought fine paintings with her own money over her lifetime and even owns a Renoir. "Oh, it's nothing," she says, in her typically understated fashion. "It's just a nice little sketch."

About the time she turned 80, Phyllis started to paint. The upstairs of her Corea cottage is ablaze with little paint pots and artist's paraphernalia, and a small stack of her works is ready for showing at the Corea Seaside Grange on Saturday. The influence of Matisse and Milton Avery seem evident in the bold colors and forms displayed in her paintings and collages.

When I asked her how she came to be in Corea, Phyllis told me that after Matty died she wanted to see what her cousin Barry's place in Maine was like. Barry offered her the use of the tiny cottage across from the Black Duck from June to September.

"Corea is the most marvelous place," she says, practically gushing. "It's so beautiful. But I think what I love most about it is the people. They are so open, so accepting and so caring. It doesn't matter who you are or what you believe."

Phyllis knows virtually everyone in Corea, primarily because she goes everywhere on foot. "I used to walk about six miles a day," she recalls. "The farthest I've gone so far this summer is Cranberry Point and over to the lobster coop on Crowley Island." Both are

roughly a mile round trip.

Aside from her big hats, one of the most noticeable things about Phyllis is her hand-painted shoes. "I had a bad back years ago and couldn't wear high heels," she explains. "I finally found some French shoes called Arche. They were lace-ups and looked like old-lady shoes, but they were the most comfortable ones I could get. By the time they wore out, the company had stopped making them. I painted them and kept replacing the soles. The ones I'm wearing are at least 10 years old."

I mentioned that I had recently seen a pair of her old painted shoes at the studio of Corea artist Rachel Schiro. Rachel's husband, Larry, had owned Standard Shoe in Bangor. One of Phyllis' shoes is trapped in an old Brannock shoe-measuring device left over from the store and will eventually become part of an artistic assemblage. "I wonder if Rachel would let me have those old shoes back," Phyllis chuckles, grinning. "I'm running out of good ones."

And then she let me know firmly that the interview was over. "I'm having dinner at the cousin Norma's at six, so I've got to get ready," she declares, rising to her full 4-foot-plus height. Norma is Norma Canner, Barry's mother.

"I'm nothing compared with her," Phyllis avows. "She started out as an actress, but turned to dance. She was a real pioneer in the dance therapy movement, and she did wonders for disabled youth. She is so talented and amazing. I would love to have danced myself, but I never could have held a candle to Norma. She's the one you should be writing about."

With that, she pours a bit of Dewar's scotch into an empty pill bottle and screws on the lid for the short walk to Norma's. "Do you think maybe this helped me get to 97?" she asks, raising the plastic container as her eyes twinkle in the late afternoon Corea sun.

Phyllis Silverman's selected paintings and collages will be on display at the Corea Seaside Grange from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. this Saturday, Aug. 18. Phyllis plans to be at the Grange Hall in person during the morning, probably between 10 and 11 a.m. Beth Parks is a free-lance writer and photographer who lives in the Hancock County village of Corea.