

The Rabblrouser and the Homebody: Minnesota's Elizabeth Olds and Wanda Gág

Exhibition Dates: March 24 - December 9, 2018

Gallery 316 Labels - FINAL

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

Picasso Study Club, 1940

Color screenprint

Gift of Mrs. C.C. Bovey P.11,768

New Yorkers were nuts about Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) in the 1930s. Elizabeth Olds thought the hero-worship ridiculous, largely because she suspected that most people hadn't bothered to understand the Spanish artist's work.

The distorted faces of these Picasso Study Club members look right at home next to the abstract artworks they're studying. Old's satire coincided with an exhibition of 300 Picasso works that opened in New York in 1939, his biggest U.S. show to date.



The 1939 Picasso show included “Les Demoiselles d’Avignon” (The Young Ladies of Avignon), 1907, oil, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[\[https://www.pablocicasso.org/avignon.jsp\]](https://www.pablocicasso.org/avignon.jsp)

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

Adoration of the Masters, 1941

Color screenprint

Private collection, Minneapolis. Promised gift to Mia.

Elizabeth Olds viewed art museums as elitist and enjoyed skewering the pretensions of art lovers. Here visitors react to a masterpiece of the Italian Renaissance, Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*. Several in the crowd appear dumbstruck while others act as if the goddess forgot her clothes. Olds gave the hand-wringing woman toward the middle an elongated face and her friend a puckered one, similar to faces in the Botticelli.



Sandro Botticelli, "The Birth of Venus," c. 1482–85, tempera on canvas, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Honoré Daumier

French, 1808–1879

Still More Venuses This Year....Always Venuses!, 1864, from "Croquis Pris au Salon" in *Le Charivari*

Lithograph

The Minnich Collection The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund P.17,619

Elizabeth Olds's inspiration for *Adoration of the Masters* was the French satirist Honoré Daumier (1808–79). Famous for satirizing politicians—a talent that got him briefly jailed—Daumier was forced to find milder targets after Emperor Napoleon III's caricature crackdown in 1852–66. "Connoisseurs" became favorite topics of his ridicule. Here, after bemoaning the number of classical nudes on exhibit, the woman at left adds, "as if there were any women built like that!"

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

Camera Club, c. 1936

Lithograph

Private collection, Minneapolis. Promised gift to Mia.

[NO LABEL]

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

Concert, 1938

Color screenprint

Private collection, Minneapolis. Promised gift to Mia.

Elizabeth Olds was fond of creating “types”—exaggerated or generalized figures that represent a certain kind of personality. In this screenprint she revisits Miss Manchester, a harpist she had shown performing for people experiencing homelessness in the Great Depression (1929–39). In that print, the audience was the very image of appreciation. Now Olds seems to typify a wealthier set of listeners, one where balding heads give way to fashionable hats.



Elizabeth Olds, “Miss Manchester’s Program for Homeless Men,” 1936, lithograph.

<http://nndaily.blogspot.com/2015/11/new-deal-art-miss-manchesters-musical.html>

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

Dead End Beach, 1939

Color screenprint

Private collection, Minneapolis. Promised gift to Mia.

The realist artist George Luks (1867–1933) taught Elizabeth Olds to look for subjects beyond the enclaves of the wealthy elite. He urged her to wander New York’s ethnic and working-class neighborhoods, which is probably how she discovered this scene. Using the quick, reportorial manner advocated by Luks, she captured the unsuspected delights of this industrial pier.

Olds met Luks in 1921 as an art student in New York. She became his assistant, accompanying him on sketching trips across the city. She learned to observe the realities of modern life, which often were far different than her own privileged background while growing up in Minneapolis.



Olds shortly after working with Luks, c. 1925.

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

Hunting, 1940

Color screenprint

Private collection, Minneapolis. Promised gift to Mia.

A child of privilege (her father managed the family's rental properties), Elizabeth Olds spent her Minneapolis childhood entering swimming races and horse shows. Her love of horses is displayed in this print. It shows a hunter becoming distracted when he thinks his jacket has gotten snagged on the ears of a passing horse. The unsettled sky suggests the calamity to follow.

Olds was such an accomplished horsewoman that while living in Paris in the 1920s she worked as a trick bareback rider in the circus. She sketched the horses between performances.



Olds riding at Lake of the Isles, Minneapolis, c. 1920.

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

Three Men and a Fish, 1940

Color screenprint

Gift of Mrs. C.C. Bovey P.11,769

Screenprinting gave artists access to all the eye-popping colors that commercial printers had traditionally used for posters, banners, and signage. The high-toned red and yellow on these Sunday fishermen, as Elizabeth Olds called them, seem to attract equally

colorful fish. She probably made the checkered pattern on the boat and clothes by placing a wire screen under the silken mesh before forcing paint across it with a squeegee.

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

Tourists, c. 1938–39

Color screenprint

Gift of Mrs. C.C. Bovey P.11,766

Elizabeth Olds poked fun at class differences with these tourists, whose arrival is underscored by an intrusive salmon color for the sand. All five characters have their mouths open to offer a comment, perhaps asking these local net-menders what they are doing, or telling them a better way to do it. Meanwhile, the artist at her easel merits no attention at all.

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

Merry-Go-Round, 1940

Color screenprint

Gift of Mrs. C.C. Bovey P.11,767

The little girl confidently riding a huge white horse points to Elizabeth Olds’s concern for racial justice. Like other liberal artists in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s, Olds believed that art could effect social change. Her approach here is matter-of-fact, depicting diverse riders enjoying a popular pastime. They could be at New York’s Coney Island amusement park, which in 1938 had thirteen carousels.

To achieve her painterly look, Olds painted her design on the gauzy mesh screen with a greasy substance, then treated it so that the unpainted areas hardened into a stencil. Each color had a different stencil. The technique is especially effective in the delicate warm-gray shading on the horse.

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

Miners, 1937

Color lithograph

Private collection, Minneapolis. Promised gift to Mia.

Elizabeth Olds probably met these men while visiting mining operations in Pennsylvania, where deaths from mining accidents in the 1930s averaged 200 a year. This was about a sixth of the total coal mine deaths in the entire country. It's possible that the blue tinge on these miners' faces refers to the small bluish pits workers got on their skin from standing too close to a dynamite blast.

This ennobling portrait may convey an underlying message of support for miner unionization. The men's common gaze suggests teamwork, while their beacon-like headlamps may point to the role of miners in the country's economic recovery. Their racial and ethnic diversity may reflect Olds's support for general union efforts to be more inclusive.



Olds working on this lithograph, seen here in reverse, c. 1937.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Elizabeth_Olds#/media/File:Archives_of_American_Art_-_Elizabeth_Olds_-_2309.jpg

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

Steel Mills, c. 1937

Color lithograph

Lent by the Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis, Museum purchase, 1939.12

Elizabeth Olds's interest in labor themes took her to the Carnegie-Illinois steel mill in western Pennsylvania in 1937. Beneath a layer of grimy black soot, the orange color may suggest the heat of the blast furnaces. Olds sketched a few faceless workers in front of their wooden houses, which are overshadowed by the colossal steel mill. Within a few years this plant would number 450 buildings—paid for, Olds noted, “out of the product of its workmen.”

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

Harlem Musicians, c. 1940

Color screenprint

Gift of Mrs. C.C. Bovey P.11,770

The purpose of art in the 1930s, Elizabeth Olds said, was to record “the vital and significant” in life. She found this brass band in New York’s Harlem neighborhood, which she described as “a bevy of activity in the afternoons and evenings.” Some musicians are packed close together and some more widely spaced, as if mirroring the flow of music. The players’ legs form rhythmic curves, suggesting another connection to the music.

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

Beef Skinners, No. 2, from the “Stockyard Series,” 1934

Lithograph

From the Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society, Gift of the Crump Family in Memory of Bob and Pat Kennedy Crump

During a stay in Omaha, Nebraska, Elizabeth Olds went to Swift and Company and asked to sketch workers in its slaughterhouse. The subject was almost unheard-of for women at the time. The company agreed, however, and issued her a white apron and rubber boots. To record these men preparing to skin a carcass, she simplified their stances and used strongly contrasting lights and darks, which seems to lend weight and dignity to their work.

Olds had initially gone to Omaha to create family portraits for local industrialist Samuel Rees, who owned a printing plant. At one point she convinced a Rees employee to teach her how to print lithographs. It was a rare skill for American artists in the mid-1930s—so rare that most had their lithographs printed in New York by George C. Miller, the only printer in the country who catered to artists. It’s very possible Olds printed the “Stockyard Series” herself.

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

The Iron Begins to Flow, 1934

Lithograph

Lent by the Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis, Gift of the Works in Progress Administration Federal Art Project, Washington, D.C., 1943.230

Allowed rare access inside a U.S. Steel plant, Elizabeth Olds captured the dangerous spectacle of molten iron crashing into a cauldron. The blinding heat is conveyed by the pure whiteness of the paper. Yet amid the wondrous technology, Olds stressed the role of humans. As the iron arrives, the worker at right opens a rounded gate to direct it into the proper chute.

These weighty, simplified figures were influenced by the Mexican artist José Clemente Orozco (1883–1949). Olds saw his mural *The Epic of American Civilization* (1932–34) in progress at Dartmouth University in New Hampshire, and she quickly adopted his forms.



José Clemente Orozco, “The Epic of American Civilization: Modern Industrial Man,” 1932–34, fresco, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College.

<http://hoodmuseum.dartmouth.edu/objects/p.934.13.24>

José Clemente Orozco

Mexican, 1883–1949

El requiem, 1928

Lithograph

Gift of Mrs. Charles C. Bovey P.11,646

[NO LABEL]

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

White Collar Boys, 1936

Lithograph

Gift of the Art History Club, 1938 P.11,599

In this comic satire, Elizabeth Olds took aim at the office workers herding lockstep to their offices, their heads planted above absurdly high collars. The repetitions and thick shading were borrowed from the Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco (1883–1949), whom Olds much admired.

Olds worked for the Federal Art Project (FAP), which employed artists during the Great Depression (1929–39) as part of the Works Progress Administration. Under the rules of the FAP, every image had to be approved before being printed. Fearing rejection, Olds had this attack on middle-class conformity printed privately, outside the FAP.



José Clemente Orozco, “The Rear Guard,” 1929, lithograph.

<http://www.mmoca.org/mmocacollects/artists/Jose-clemente-orozco>

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

Wall Street Station, 1936

Lithograph

Lent by the Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis, Gift of the Works in Progress Administration Federal Art Project, Washington, D.C., 1943.229

[NO LABEL]

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

Burlesque, 1939

Lithograph

Lent by Mary Ryan, New York

Burlesque turns the typical dynamic of a burlesque theater on its head. Here the dancers have the power, their rigid arms and legs forming, as one art historian put it, “a wall of angular energy.” The women’s distorted, almost sinister smiles underscore their dominance and defy the male audience to think of them as anything more than workers doing a job.

Until New York City banned burlesque theaters in 1937, artists used them as inexpensive places to practice drawing from live models. The nudity in this print made it unacceptable for publication by the government’s Works Progress Administration/Federal Art Project, where Elizabeth Olds worked, so she had it printed privately by lithographer George C. Miller.

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

The Lone Ranger, 1942

Color screenprint

Private collection, Minneapolis

Elizabeth Olds needed more than low-cost screenprints to realize her dream of putting art in the hands of ordinary people, increasing what she called “cultural literacy.” She had to create images people could relate to. “The Lone Ranger” radio show was an excellent bet—by 1939, an estimated 20 million Americans were tuning in every week, and more than 3,000 episodes would air before the show ended in the 1950s with the rise of television. Here the masked hero narrates into a microphone as he and his sidekick, Tonto, fly across the plains. (“Hi-yo, Silver! Away!”) By giving Tonto a headband with a feather, Olds reflected the highly stereotyped persona of this Native American character, who was voiced by a white actor on the radio show.



An avid horsewoman, Olds returns from a horse show at the Minnesota State Fair.

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

Ducklings, 1940

Color screenprint

Private collection, Minneapolis

Elizabeth Olds knew that the federal support received by artists during the Great Depression would be ending in the early 1940s. She also knew that when her weekly government stipend stopped, she had to produce picturesque subjects that would sell. She was clearly testing the waters with these ducks. Screenprints would never make her rich, however. A 1940 show of screenprints at the Weyhe Gallery in New York priced them at \$1 each, or about \$17.75 today.

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

Me and Her, after 1945

Color screenprint

Private collection, Minneapolis. Promised gift to Mia.

The American documentary photographer Berenice Abbott (1898–1991) liked this rooster and hen so much that she traded her friend Elizabeth Olds a photograph for it. Around 1945, Abbott took the photo of the artist that is enlarged in this gallery.



The print “Me and Her” is visible on the wall behind Abbott. Photograph by Arnold H. Crane, 1970.
[IN MEDIA BIN: 76.81.48]

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

Noah’s Dory, c. 1940–1945

Color screenprint

Lent by the Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis, Gift of Ione and Hudson D. Walker, 1953.195

[NO LABEL]

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

The Cove, Maine, 1941

Color screenprint

Private collection, Minneapolis. Promised gift to Mia.

[NO LABEL]

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

Three Alarm Fire, 1940

Color screenprint

Elizabeth Olds Papers, Kerlan Collection, Children's Literature Research Collections,
University of Minnesota Libraries

Elizabeth Olds poured everything she had into this screenprint, one of her last. Shooting water directs our eye to the fire, built with layers of orange, gray, black, and vivid red. The sinuous flames contrast with the flat planes of the building, which recalls Olds's architecture studies at the University of Minnesota (1916–18). Water pooling around the block indicates how long this battle has been raging.

In making such a big screenprint, Olds risked bending the frame that held the gauzy mesh screen, stretching the screen, and throwing off color alignment. But her gutsiness paid off. As described on the print, youngsters at a 1941 exhibition in New York voted it a favorite, winning Olds \$25.

Elizabeth Olds

American, 1896–1991

Illustrations for *The Big Fire*, 1945

Hand-colored lithographs

Elizabeth Olds Papers, Kerlan Collection, Children's Literature Research Collections,
University of Minnesota Libraries

After seeing the print *Three Alarm Fire* (to your right), Elizabeth Olds's friend Roberta Fansler, a museum educator, suggested she turn it into a book. The result was a history of fire-fighting called *The Big Fire*. Olds hand-colored these lithographs to instruct the printer what colors to use.

The Big Fire launched Olds on a second career in children's books. Her subjects show the same inquisitive mind she brought to her mining and steel mill prints. *Riding the Rails* (1948) traces train travel; *Deep Treasure* (1958) addresses oil exploration. The last of her six books came out in 1963.