Banner 5/21/99 A4

FARNHAM SEEKS MEANING BETWEEN THE LINES

By Sue Harrison
BANNER STAFF

Today is Emily Farnham's birthday, and the 87-year-old painter, well-respected art historian, former educator and author is getting a double present — an opening at the Berta Walker Gallery from 6 to 8 p.m. tomorrow and the first copies of her new book, "Hofmann: Abstraction as Plastic Expression and Notes Made in Hofmann's Classes."

The Walker exhibit spans 40 years of Farnham's painting and moves the viewer through various styles from representational to abstract. The book chronicles the teachings of Hans Hofmann and is based on Farnham's years as Hofmann's student in the late '40s and early '50s. (She will also hold a book signing at the gallery from 4 to 5 p.m. Sunday.)

After a lifetime of travel and teaching in states from one side of the country to the other, Farnham returned to Provincetown to live out her retirement and continue her work. As she now approaches her 90s, she is planning another book, paints when she's not writing, and freely offers her opinions on everything from how computers affect creativity and the current state of the arts in Provincetown to the role of women in the arts during this century.

"I thought this would be a really exciting art colony, and I'm a little disappointed, to tell the truth," Farnham says. "When I was here in '49 and the '50s, it was perfect. Now all they care about is the money."

She remembers the heady years when Hofmann was teaching and the studios and galleries teemed with artists electrified by new theory and change. In today's art world, the battle is the same as it was then, she says.

"The town is awfully narrow about the painters it likes," she says. "There's always been a war between old-fashioned realism and modernism."

Farnham notes that even Charles Hawthorne, the man considered to be the father of Provincetown's art colony was caught up in the two sides.

"He lived in a different time," she says of Hawthorne's later years. "Art was switching over to modernism, and I don't think he wanted to change even though they [Hawthorne and his wife] went to Paris every winter. They saw Picasso and his companion, who was also a very good painter, and there was so much going on around them. They didn't think it would last more than a few years, but it went on to become the great art form of the 20th century."

Photos Sue Harrison

"Self Portrait with Teacup" by Emily Farnham, part of the Berta Walker Gallery show that opens on Friday.

Farnham certainly knows about what has gone on in this century because she has spent most of her life teaching art, design and art history. Her doctoral dissertation on Charles Demuth was later turned into a book that was nominated for a National Book Award, and she is considered one of the country's top experts on that artist.

But Farnham didn't start out to be a teacher. She was drawn to art from the time she was a very young girl. Her father taught her how to draw with perspective and her mother, a classical pianist who admired all the arts, encour-

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"Michigan Woman" is Farnham's study of female factory workers.

Emily Farnham with her study of spatial relationships in Rembrandt.

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aged her by sending her to art classes as a girl.

"Mother tried me on singing but I don't have a voice," she says. She studied piano and flute but her heart went elsewhere. "I had no passion for it [the flute]."

Farnham's passion developed for drawing and painting, and from the first she was attracted by strong lines and the relationship they made to each other and to the spaces between the objects on the canvas.

Farnham left her childhood home in Kent, Ohio and went to Cleveland to study art on a scholarship but soon realized her chances of making a living as an artist were limited by her gender. Of the 26 teachers she has had in her lifetime, the majority were men, and she says they tended to consistently look down on their female students.

"They thought women were not very capable of feeling about art, that they would get caught up in family matters and not give it their attention," she says of the attitudes she faced. "I was very put down. It's unkind and untrue. My mother didn't understand. She thought my career was made less important by men and she was right. I have women friends now who think that is all over but I don't think that's true."

So she switched gears and looked toward teaching and history. With summers off, she traveled and studied and continued with her own work. She taught in states from Utah to North Carolina and did a stint in Bonn, Germany. She served as an art consultant, painted murals in a theater in Mexico and did commercial art in Los Angeles. Today she's found in 13 different Who's Who compilations.

As she left each state, she painted her distillation of the women who lived there.

"I was in Oklahoma during the windstorms. The town had red dirt everywhere. I walked to and from school and had to wash my shoes when I got home," she says of the time that inspired "Oklahoma Woman," a depiction of a worn-down but not defeated slim woman surrounded by small houses and red dirt everywhere. The "Michigan Woman" reflects the large number of factory workers and she is shown boxed in by Ford and Olds factories belching smoke. But the woman looks serene and is centered in front of a spokeless Ferris wheel which rings her head like a halo, the simple pleasure of the carnival delivering her from the drudgery of her life.

The other works are equally compelling, especially the strongly rendered self-portrait with teacup.

As the century progressed, Farnham's art and writing did, too, finally ending up with her using a word processor for her papers and books. But she has misgivings about what speed does to the end product. "I'm not sure it leads to creativity," she says. "I'm not sure it can produce another William Shakespeare. I have the feeling it doesn't. When I produce writing that's deeply felt, I can't do it fast. I have to step over to a different state of mind."

Around the middle of the century she stepped to another place, abstract art, and found it satisfied her.

"I'm more interested in form than subject, that's why I took to Hofmann so easily," she says. "He said to build a form behind the picture. The plane is two-dimensional, the only thing you can touch. But if you get behind the surface you are no longer copying nature but building relationships."

She continues, "It's no fun for me to do realism. The fun is in the creation of space. Every painting has two or three motifs that can have several objects in each. What you enjoy is the space in between."

And although she's talking about abstract work, she says the finest painters have always approached

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their final image that way. She analyzes famous paintings and has come to her own theory of why they are the way they are.

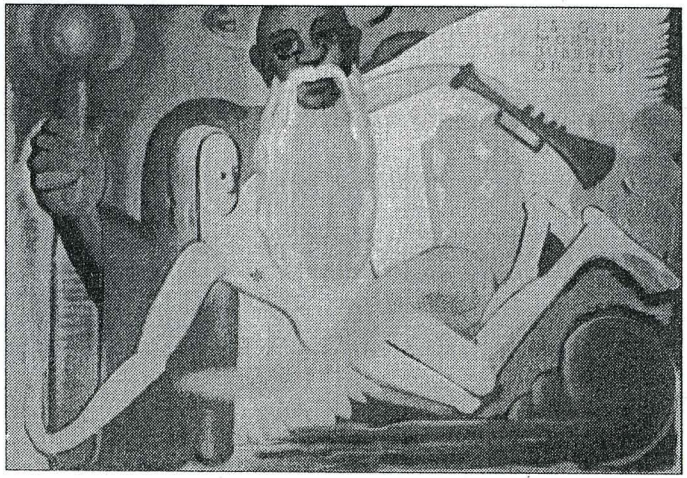
"If you study Rembrandt you'll see he would get into the painting and enjoy it. He didn't care what the public thought."

Farnham pulls out a study where she took a Rembrandt and then began to deconstruct it into component sets of lines and curves. The piece begins with a Xerox of his painting and ends with her drawing which is a completely abstracted series of swirls that she says is, in fact, the same subject.

"What you are after is space, that's what's thrilling," she says as she explains her series of drawings. "Start with the realism, then say, over here is a series of masses and here is space. I think every great painter was a great abstract painter under the surface. Rembrandt was a great abstract painter."

She puts the study back in its slot in the wall of canvases and drawings and says she should probably put her theories and drawings into a book soon. "You have to spend part of life analyzing in music and art," she advises, "but that doesn't come first, it comes later on."

Happy birthday, Miss Emily.



Farnham takes on religion in "He Loves All Things."

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night in Bozeman, Montana. She is keeping the tour dates fairly close to home because she is finishing mixing a live album in New York and recording and writing songs for a new album at her home studio in Wellfleet. Plus, she has a songbook due to be published this summer. "It's kind of a lot happening at once," she says.

But, she adds, she's happy to have a reason to be near home for Memorial Day. "I like doing something at the very beginning of the summer," Larkin says, "because it seems like even though it's kind of crazy for many people, it still hasn't gotten to the August total craziness. ... I love this time of year. I always describe it as like Oz the first time Dorothy swung through — you know, everything is just so wonderful and beautiful and in full color." Then she adds, laughing, "And then by August it gets to be like the second time she came to Oz, where it's just very real."

On the heels of the success of her last CD, the innovative "Perishable Fruits," Larkin's upcoming live album, due out in August, is a mix of songs from the last four albums she did for Windham Hill's High Street label. Larkin announced to the Banner that she has just switched labels to Vanguard Records after Windham Hill was recently purchased by the industry giant, BMG, who discontinued the High Street label. After discussions with a few other larger-name labels, Larkin decided Vanguard was the right place for her.

Larkin enjoys experimenting and testing her own musical limits, or rather, breaking out of those limits. On "Perishable Fruits," she experimented with achieving different sounds, including percussive sounds, using only stringed instruments. On her new album, she says, "Everything is just me and a drummer. It's the bookend of the last one," although she says she'll be adding other instruments as she lays down additional tracks.

Ben Whitman, the drummer who helped to achieve the nontraditional percussive sounds on "Perishable Fruits," is working with her on her new album. "We're really trying to tailor the drum parts to the guitar parts, which for me, you know, sort of the solo player..." Larkin stops, is quiet for a moment, then continues, "People don't think I have a big huge ego, but I do," she says, laughing. "I don't want to change my guitar part too much. Because of this home-studio setup we can spend a day, day-and-a-half, working on one song. You can do [that] in a large studio, it just costs a lot more. I wanted to keep the left-of-center outlook that I achieved on 'Perishable Fruits.' I think we got some real unique sounds and approached songs differently."

Larkin says she gets a little nervous doing a concert on her home turf. "It's scary because — and I think I've heard other people say the same thing about playing in or near their hometown — it's scary because they're your friends, and in the back of my mind I'm thinking they're thinking, 'Alright, let's see what she does all the time when she's away.' " But, she adds, "I have a lot of fond memories of the Meeting House. I've had more than several epiphanies there, so it's a great place to play. It has a lot of meaning for me, and a lot of emotion behind it."

The benefit concert is scheduled for 8:30 p.m. Sunday, May 30 at the Universalist Meeting House, 236 Commercial St. Tickets for the concert are $20 at the door, or $18 in advance from Provincetown Reservations System, 293 Commercial St., or call (800) 648-0364 or 487-2400.

Farnham exhibit reveals evolution of artist

By CINDY NICKERSON
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

PROVINCETOWN – Artist-art historian Emily Farnham celebrated her 87th birthday on May 27. And if she made a wish for lots of happy excitement in her life, it certainly came true.

The following day she attended the opening for a fascinating retrospective of her paintings at Berta Walker Gallery. On May 30, she returned to the gallery to autograph copies of her new book on abstract expressionist Hans Hofmann.

Art REVIEW

It's exciting, too, to see the progression of Farnham's work over the course of a half-century, ranging from the 1930s to the 1980s.

Portrait of the artist

The earliest piece is a self-portrait, painted when Farham was about 20. She has a bob of dark brown hair, heavy-lidded eyes and cupid's-bow, red lips. A later self-portrait, dated circa 1952, focuses on the smooth, silver bun of her hair. Looking away from the viewer, Farnham holds a teacup with one hand while studying the palm of the other, as if puzzling out her fortune.

The future, if she could have foreseen it, would have included earning a doctorate in art history from Ohio State University; a long teaching career culminating with15 years at East Carolina University in Greenville, N.C.; the acclaimed publication of her book "Charles Demuth: Behind a Laughing Mask" (University of Oklahoma Press, 1971); retirement to Provincetown about 20 years ago; and the self-publication of her latest book,"Hofmann: Abstraction as Plastic Expression and Notes Made in Hofmann's Classes." Farnham, who continued with her own artwork throughout her academic career, studied with the German-American teacher in 1949 and 1950 in Provincetown and in 1953 in New York.

Farnham's early portraits are the most compelling part of the Berta Walker show. In the especially intriguing "Michigan Woman," a stylized background of smokestacks from the Ford and Oldsmobile factories establishes Detroit as the setting. The subject – apparently a young worker dressed for a rare evening out – is really a type, not any Michigander in particular. Her head has a downward tilt, like a medieval Madonna, and is surrounded by the "halo" of a Ferris wheel, indicating the fair has come to town. Her face is innocent, yet a bit weary.

Much, much wearier-looking is the almost skeletal being in "Oklahoma Woman." A discordant background of pale green sky and orange prairie sets the mood. The woman's pale-lipped grimace of a smile and the thin breasts under her torn yellow dress also speak of the harshness of her existence.

Two views of mother

Two of the portraits are fond representations of Farnham's mother. In one, the mother's long white hair forms a sweeping cloud of softness. In the other, apparently painted during a trip to Italy in 1942, her mother sits, lovely and dignified, in front of a window affording a view of Venice.

Farnham's portraits are distinguished by definite outlines, flattened shapes and an interest in the space around objects. These same intellectual concerns remained with the artist even after her work became much more abstract. But so did the emotional edge. Even in paintings without a human presence, there is often a sense of psychological exposure. This is very strong in the wonderful "Thorns, a Pink Rose and Desire." Long red thorns, spiny branches and the fragmentation of space create the jagged setting for two pink gloves that reach for an elevated pink rose.

In her book on Hofmann, Farnham notes that Hofmann's abstractionist theories remained a mystery to some students. His talk about "plasticity" and the "push-and-pull" dynamics of painting might have escaped their understanding even if he'd spoken in the clearest English instead of with a thick Germanic accent. Farnham, however, was quickly on his wavelength. "On my part, after the first two or three days in his class, I easily understood what Hofmann was saying, and found delight in his pronunciation of 'th' as 'z,'" she says in her book.

One of the works in the show, "Beyond the Wall," was done in Hofmann's class in 1950. Perhaps the great teacher once stood facing this painting on Farnham's easel and said, "Ziss is good." Painted in dark and golden browns, light blues and red, the work certainly reveals a grasp of the "push-pull" principle. (PUSH-PULL 101: A respect for the two-dimensionality of the picture plane coupled with the illusion of a shallow space in which there's a sense of tension and movement.) In "Beyond the Wall," skewed rectangles open up the picture plane, producing the impression of a controlled explosion.

Later works

A rudimentary sun or eye is the only representational element in "Beyond the Wall." But judging from the works on view at Berta Walker, Farnham often slipped a recognizable object or two or three into her paintings even after coming under Hofmann's influence. One serene painting from 1963 contains only three round shapes. But the poetic words "The Yellow River Turns to Gold When the Moon Turns Blue" appear on a black field, conjuring up a mental image that serves as a substitute for painted objects.

From the 1970s, "Man and Wife" is a painting of two birds on a collage of torn canvas – a work as enigmatic as it is gorgeous. The largest bird (the "man" of the title?) dominates the picture. Judging by its sleek head and talon-tipped webbed feet, it's a seagull. But its legs, feet and outstretched wing are a surprising emerald green. Above the gull is a much smaller yellow bird with a blue crest. At his feet are two speckled eggs.

"Predicament of Womankind: Bound, Gagged, Imprisoned and With Child," a piece from the early 1950s, is a more obvious feminist statement. An abstraction of a woman with a cross-section view of a fetus in her stomach occupies the lower righthand corner of the painting. A suggestion of a window with bars appears at the top.

Farnham may have felt the oppression of sexism during her long career, but surely has done her part to break through those limitations.

Starting today, Cindy Nickerson will write a weekly art column for the Times.

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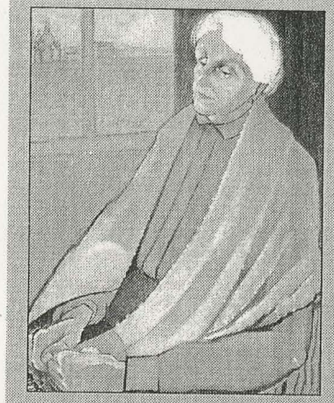
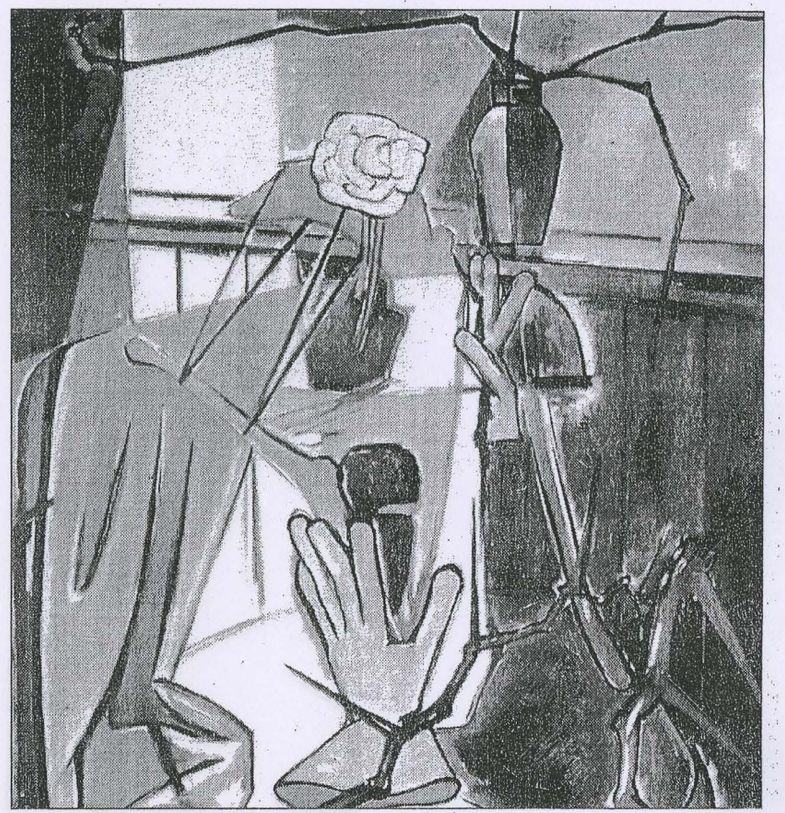


Emily Farnham's "Portrait of the Artist's Mother in Venice" (1942).

- **What:** "Emily Farnham: Paintings From the '30s–'80s"
- **Where:** Berta Walker Gallery, 208 Bradford St., Provincetown
- **When:** noon to 5 p.m. daily (except Tuesday) through June 14
- **Phone:** 487-6411



Emily Farnham's "Thorns, a Pink Rose and Desire" (circa 1951) has an emotional edge that is typical of the artist's work.

CAPE COD TIMES 6/6/99

May 15, 2004

Obituaries

'Emily may have had a schoolmarm's appearance outwardly, but there was always that mischievous sparkle in her eyes.'

WILLIAM EVAUL OF TRURO, *friend*

Dr. Emily Farnham, Provincetown artist, author

By Gloria Negri
GLOBE STAFF

Soon after her 87th birthday, Provincetown artist Emily Farnham donned one of her classic outfits, applied her bright red lipstick, and went to the Berta Walker Gallery for a retrospective of her work from the 1930s through the 1960s.

During the Provincetown gallery reception, Dr. Farnham's publisher brought in copies of the book she had just finished about her mentor, the Munich-born abstract artist Hans Hofmann, and Dr. Farnham signed copies of it for gallery-browsers.

It was the 20th one-person show for Dr. Farnham, a painter and art historian, who died May 5 at Cape End Manor in Provincetown after a massive stroke. She would have turned 92 later this month.

"Emily was an American modernist," said Erna Partoll, assistant director of Walker gallery, one of the Cape's most prestigious. "She started out in representational work, not abstract, and progressed into abstraction, and this was due to the influence of Hans Hofmann."

Dr. Farnham's work, including portraits, is represented in public and private collections and has hung in many Cape galleries.

The earliest piece in the retrospective, the Cape Cod Times reported in 1999, was a self-portrait painted when Dr. Farnham was about 20. "She has a bob of dark brown hair, heavy-lidded eyes, and cupid's-bow red lips," the paper reported.

Dr. Farnham, listed in Who's Who in America, Who's Who In The World, and in 12 other Who's Who's, painted at a big easel in the studio she had arranged in her living room with its west and south-facing windows. A year ago, osteoporosis forced her to stop painting.

Until March, when a fall put her in nursing home care, she lived independently in Provincetown for 24 years, returning to the artists' colony she had first visited as a student of Hofmann's in the summers of 1949, 1950, and 1953.

"Emily was a very feisty lady with a heart of gold," her neighbor, Andy Passomato, said. "She was so independent, she made it difficult for anyone to do anything for her."

On occasion, Passomato did get Dr. Farnham out to dinner.

"Emily normally picked at her food until the chocolate cake and ice cream were served," he said. "She took very good care of herself physically and would not go out without the proper attire and lipstick."

DR. EMILY FARNHAM

Dr. Farnham's delight in bright-colored clothes, and in coordinating them with the turbans she sometimes wore, was a reflection of her lifelong dedication to her art and how it affected the human psyche.

She had been an artist since childhood. Dr. Farnham was born in Kent, Ohio, one of two girls. A cousin, Norma Frieden of Sherborn, said Dr. Farnham's father, Burt Farnum, abandoned the family when Dr. Farnham was 6. As a way of never forgiving him, Dr. Farnham later changed the spelling of her surname.

She treasured her mother, Metta Lake (Huggins) Farnum, Dr. Farnham told friends. To encourage young Emily to paint, her mother set aside a corner of the kitchen for her first studio. Mrs. Farnum also saw to it that Emily took Saturday morning art classes, and that she was given flute and piano lessons.

Dr. Farnham told friends that when she was 19, her mother sold her stocks to fund Emily's study at the Cleveland School of Art for a year. The young artist didn't feel there were sufficient job opportunities for artists, so she returned to Kent for an undergraduate degree in education at Kent State University, and later earned a master's and doctorate degree in art history from Ohio State University.

She began her career in academia in 1934, eventually teaching art history to some 8,000 students in eight states and at as many colleges and universities before retiring from teaching in 1976.

While chairman of the art history department at East Carolina University in North Carolina, her last teaching position, Dr. Farnham served for seven years as a gubernatorial appointee to the board of the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh, and taught at ECU's European Studies Center in Bonn.

She became an expert on the painter Charles Demuth, a member of the Group of Five associated with photographer Alfred Stieglitz's gallery of contemporary art. Her 1971 biography of Demuth, "Charles Demuth: Behind a Laughing Mask," was nominated for a National Book Award.

William Evaul of Truro, an artist friend, said that while Dr. Farnham on first appearance seemed "very proper, a sherry-and-tea-drinking person," she was broad-minded and blase enough to research and write a book about the exotic and decadent life of Demuth, who lived at the turn of the 20th century and died young.

"Emily may have had a schoolmarm's appearance outwardly," Evaul said, "but there was always that mischievous sparkle in her eyes."

Dr. Farnham's book about Hofmann, "Hofmann — Abstraction as Plastic Expression and Notes Made in Hofmann's Classes," was somewhat tamer.

Until her fall, Dr. Farnham was also sketching out other ideas for books. Roslyn Garfield, her attorney, said she was thinking of a book about conversations with artists. Passomato said she talked to him about writing one about Kent, Ohio, where she grew up across the street from the people who gave their land to create Kent State University.

Apart from her art, which still consumed her life, friends said, Dr. Farnham loved and contributed financially to the welfare of animals, and she adored her Siamese cat, Prince.

She loved to read newspapers and "was proud of the fact that she never learned to cook," Passomato said.

Dr. Farnham, who never married, continued to make friends across age groups. "Emily was very hip and stayed in touch with all generations," Skipper Evaul of Truro said. "She had incredible clothes. She was a presence."

Sometimes, when Dr. Farnham felt lonely, she might offer to paint a friend's portrait, as she did for Passomato.

"Emily would have me sit," Passomato said, "but she never quite finished the portrait. I think she liked the company."

A service is planned in Provincetown.

Obituaries

Emily Farnham, 91

Artist, author, educator studied with Hofmann

Dr. Emily Farnham, 91, of Provincetown, died Wednesday, May 5 at the Cape End Manor after an illness.

Dr. Farnham was born in Kent, Ohio and studied at the Cleveland School of Art. She earned both her MA and Ph.D. degrees at Ohio State University. She traveled to Provincetown where she studied with noted abstract expressionist Hans Hofmann in 1949 and 1950. She continued her work with Hofmann in New York. Hofmann, she often said, was the greatest influence on her life.

Dr. Farnham taught at Kent State University, East Carolina University and the ECU European Studies Center in Bonn, Germany. In the course of her career she taught over 8,000 students. She also had many shows of her own work. She set up her life around teaching and then traveling in the summers. She painted murals in Mexico and did commercial art work in Los Angeles. Often, after she had spent a block of time in an area, she would distill what she felt to be the essence of the women there and put that crystallized woman into a painting. In 1976 she retired as chairman of art history at East Carolina University and three years later moved to Provincetown.

BANNER FILE PHOTO

Emily Farnham

In addition to her painting and teaching, she was also an author. Her 1972 book, "Charles Demuth: Behind a Laughing Mask," was critically well received and nominated for a National Book Award. She was considered a foremost expert on Demuth's paintings. She published a second book, "Hofmann — Abstraction As Plastic Expression and Notes Made in Hofmann's Classes," in 2002 simultaneous to a retrospective of her work held at the Berta Walker Gallery. She had an extensive art library and continued to work on her art throughout her life. After the Hofmann book she said she was beginning a third book but it was not completed prior to her death.

She is survived by a cousin, Norma Frieden of Sherburn, Mass. and many friends.

A memorial is being planned for a date in June to be announced later. Memorial donations may be made to the Provincetown Art Association, 460 Commercial St., Provincetown, MA 02657 or the Cape End Manor Residents Fund, 100 Alden St., Provincetown, MA 02657.