

PARTY

Springfield native helping restore printmaker's legacy

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Staff Writer

SPRINGFIELD — It's hard to believe a block of wood could be so terribly uncool. But in the art world of the 1950s, the kind of woodblock print made by Edna Boies Hopkins was out. Squaresville.

"You look at something as beautiful as a Hopkins print," said Dominique Vasseur, former curator of the Springfield Museum of Art, "and you wonder, how can that have fallen so far out of favor?"

Vasseur, a 1969 North High grad, was the first to catalog Hopkins' work with the book "Edna Boies Hopkins: Strong in Character, Colorful in Expression."

He also assembled 59 color woodblock prints for a related exhibit that opens locally at his hometown museum Saturday, March 22.

It's all part of a 21st century atonement for the hipster sins of the past. "We're in a position now to look back and put artists like Hopkins into a broader picture," said Vasseur, who left his post in Springfield in 2005 for a job at the Columbus Museum of Art.

Hopkins, who died in 1937, might have been spared the sight of everybody jumping on the abstraction bandwagon in the '50s, but her legacy was almost killed in a hail of splattered paint.

"The whole art scene changed," Vasseur said. "By the 1950s, figurative art was not in fashion. Hopkins' work would have been considered old-fashioned. It wasn't hip."

Vasseur discovered Hopkins almost by accident.

In 2001, just a year into his stint as deputy director and curator of the Metrans Park museum, Tim Keny of Keny Galleries in Columbus called. He wanted Vasseur to describe the Hopkins floral print "Cineraria" — the first one of her prints the Springfield museum has in its collection. Keny's gallery had a "Cineraria" print, too.

storage that day to fetch the Hopkins prints would keep him busy for the next seven years.

"I just hadn't, until that day, really looked at them," he said. "They're beautiful. Her colors are amazing. It shocked me that nobody had done any work on her."

As Vasseur put it, "The light bulb went on."

While still in Springfield, he set out to catalog her work.

A Michigan native, Hopkins was married to Mechanicsburg native and painter James Roy Hopkins, who was the first to head up Ohio State University's art department.

The husband overshadowed the wife, but Edna was no slouch.

"She was a highly accomplished artist who had an international reputation," Vasseur said.

So why isn't she better remembered?

The arrival of modern art after World War II notwithstanding, Hopkins stopped making prints clear back in the 1920s.

Her arthritis, Vasseur said, became too painful to carve woodblocks.

Her gender didn't help much, either.

In her day, it would have been too hard for a woman to compete in painting — no, seriously — so she chose printmaking.

"Printmaking," Vasseur said, "was a way for a woman to make her mark in the world."

Hopkins made the most of it.

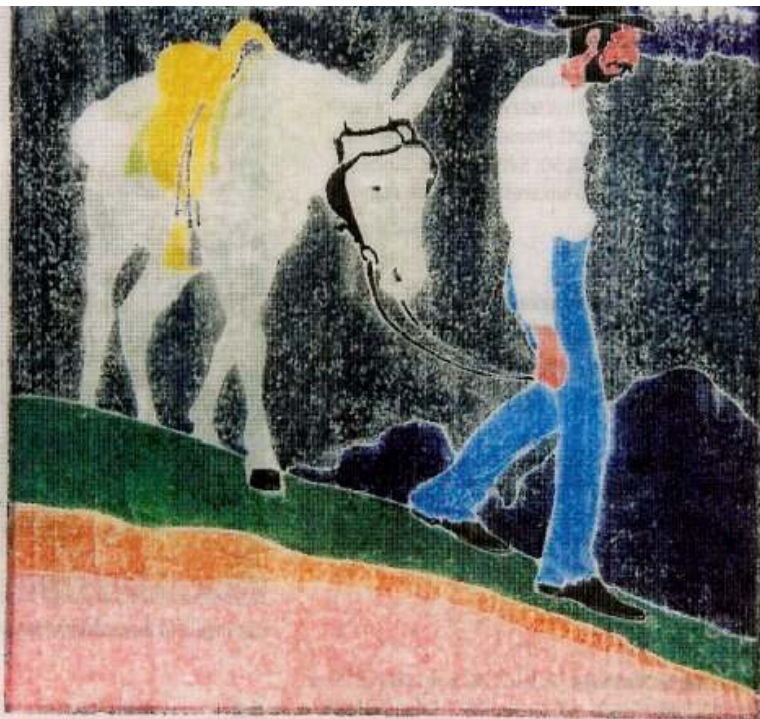
"She really shows herself to have an exquisite sense of composition and color," Vasseur said. "In her field, she's right at the top."

Vasseur finished his Hopkins research while in his current job as curator of European art in Columbus.

The related exhibit, with prints assembled from private collections and museums across the country, debuted at the Columbus museum.

After its stay in Springfield, the show travels to Provincetown, Mass., the famed Cape Cod art colony where Hopkins spent several summers.

If anything, the exhibit proves



Edna Boies Hopkins, "The Mountaineer" (1917, color woodblock print)



Edna Boies Hopkins, "Fig Leaves" (circa 1910, color woodblock print)



Edna Boies Hopkins, "Canoes" (1917, color woodblock print)

How to go

"Edna Boies Hopkins: Strong in Character, Colorful in Expression" runs from March 22 to June 1 at the Springfield Museum of Art, 107 Cliff Park Road.