



Minnie Evans



Photograph by Nina Howell Starr, 1973

Minnie Evans is a self-taught artist; she has said that no one *could* teach her because “no one knows what to teach me.” This is the statement of a true original which attests to the strength of her inherent muse.

She has also said “My whole life has been dreams,” and another time “I had day visions—they would take advantage of me.” Sometimes in talking with her it is hard to be sure whether she is describing a sleeping dream or a waking vision. She also talks about the involuntary aspect of her work, like the appearance of eyes, how she has sought to “outheen” them only to find them back in the picture. “Something had my hand” is the way she described this force. We are reminded of the surrealist desire to become an *appareil*, a vehicle for an outside directive. No wonder she is known as an “innocent surrealist.”

Modern Art was chosen for reproduction here because in it are many of the most important elements found in her oeuvre. There are angels, the eyes, flowers and trees, a glowing sky with gold

stars and a rainbow. She has enclosed the scene in a multicolored mandala-like frame of curving scalloped units, part foliate, part chromatic spirals. Containment of the design in a mandala is characteristic of much of her work, enforcing her use of symmetry.

The painting is dominated by the full face of a person who looks in a commanding way at the startling chimerical apparition below her. One can recognize similar chimeras in other works by Minnie Evans, always paper-white, drawn in black ink or pencil. In this one, we see a large decorated human face and two smaller human heads, a winged and horned beast with added eyes, and also a small area of calligraphic “writings” in a space that unites man and beast. Minnie Evans often introduces this calligraphic motif which mimics ancient writing. In *Modern Art* it is used two ways: worked into a design with no apparent literary or literal intent, and also covering the pages of a book as though meant to be read.

Minnie Evans has scant explanation for any of her imagery or symbols. In fact she has said “My work is just as strange to me as they are to anyone else.” The only symbol she recognizes is what she calls her “money sign,” curious columns of contiguous S’s on bird’s legs, sometimes crested. But the money signs she has seen—they were in the woods walking around “with greenback bills on their heads, and switching their tails like ducks.”

Although her actual life experience has been limited to a small area of North Carolina (with a brief sojourn in Virginia as a child) until she first visited New York in 1966, there is a large still-unknown but surely notable part of her life that must be recognized. During most of three decades of domestic service in two homes her exposure to art of wide and high order can be assumed. Her second employer, whose wife was the widow of the

first, was Henry Walters, son of William T. Walters, the founder of the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore. Henry Walters himself continued his father's generous devotion to the gallery.

Questioning the few people who remember these homes has provided no specific possible sources of the imagery of Minnie Evans. However, the wonder of her work is compounded by its comparison to that of others: to Klee for the appearance especially of calligraphic figures, or psychograms, in both their work; to Rousseau for the visionary elements and also the simple confidence of both; and to Blake for the apocalyptic subjects they present, their symmetry of composition and particularly the reality to both of the visions they have described. Geoffrey Ashe and Nathan C. Starr have noted how

the testimony of Blake and Evans reinforce for us the actuality of visions seen.

In what we know of her life there are two important objective sources of her art clearly established: the exuberance of nature that she experienced closely in her twenty-seven years tending the admissions gate at Airlie Gardens in Wilmington, and the Bible, especially the book of Revelation. In it colors are named in abundance and vivid phenomena, natural, supernatural and demonic, are richly described. It was with a sigh of love and wonder that Minnie Evans commented once to me "Oh Revelations, my, my!"

Nina Howell Starr
Guest Curator

Selected Bibliography

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"Beautiful Dreamer," *Newsweek* (New York), August 4, 1969, pp. 85-86.

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- Blakeston, Oswald, Jr. "Minnie Evans," *Arts Review* (London), September 12, 1970.
- Starr, Nina Howell. "Minnie Evans: Something Had My Hand," *Ms. Magazine* (New York), May 1974, pp. 71-73.

Biography

- 1892 December 12, Minnie Eva Jones born in a log cabin in Long Creek, Pender County, North Carolina.
- 1893 Moved to Wilmington, North Carolina, to live with mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. The latter told her about their first ancestor in the United States, Moni, who came from Trinidad as a slave early in the century, and about other ancestors.
- c. 1903 Moved to Wrightsville Beach, near Wilmington, where she has lived ever since. Left school "promoted to the sixth grade." Worked as "sounder," selling oysters and clams from door to door.
- 1908 Married Julius Evans, "body servant" of Mr. Pembroke Jones; they had three sons.
- c. 1916 Employed as domestic at Pembroke Park and later at Airlie, homes of Mr. and Mrs. Pembroke Jones. Continued to work for Mrs. Jones after Mr. Jones's death and Mrs. Jones's subsequent marriage to Henry Walters.
- 1935 Good Friday, made *My Very First* and *My Second* drawings.
- c. 1940 Started making crayon and pencil and ink drawings on 5 x 7" paper.
- c. 1943 -75 Many drawings on 12 x 9" paper.
- c. 1945 Drawings on reverse side of discarded stationery of U. S. Coast Guard ensign, 9½ x 7".
- 1948-74 Worked as gatekeeper at Airlie Gardens after its purchase by W. A. Corbett. Gave up this job because of poor health.
- c. 1954 First paintings in oil.

- 1966 After first trip to New York for her exhibition there, began making collages using her own earlier drawings with oil paint and ink and pencil.
- 1969 Honored for art contributions by the Links, a national service organization of black women.

Selected Exhibitions

- c. 1961 Exhibited at the Little Gallery in Wilmington, North Carolina.
- 1966 First New York exhibition, "The Lost World of Minnie Evans," at the Church of the Epiphany and at St. Clement's Episcopal Church.
- 1969 "Minnie Evans: Paintings and Drawings," and "Minnie Evans: Innocent Surrealist," The Art Image, New York; "Minnie Evans. Pictures," Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut.
- 1970 "Paintings by Minnie Evans," St. John's Art Gallery, Wilmington, North Carolina; one-woman exhibition, Portal Gallery, London; "Painting and Sculpture Today—1970," Indianapolis Museum of Art, circulated to Toledo and Wichita; "Twentieth Century Folk Art," Museum of American Folk Art, New York.
- 1970-72 "Symbols and Images: Contemporary Primitive Artists," American Federation of Arts circulating exhibition.
- 1972 "Landscapes," Penthouse exhibition, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 1973 "Mothers' Day," Studio Museum in Harlem, New York.

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The checklist of the exhibition is separate from this brochure.