

AGNES MARTIN

Vancouver's Long Lost Daughter

*The story of the artist's
early Vancouver life*



by Fred Hume

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Fred Hume and Jim Bradbury

Additional Research

Angela Raasch

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**For more information
please contact**

Jim Bradbury
jibsal@shaw.ca

Fred Hume
Katherinehume@shaw.ca

King George Secondary
School Archives
1755 Barclay St., Vancouver,
V6G 1K6, B.C.



Agnes Martin in her studio

Photo by Mildred Tolbert, 1954

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*The story of
the artist's early
Vancouver life*



Agnes Martin painting in her studio.

**"...most
celebrated
painter ever
born in
Canada."**

Ottawa Citizen

David Bellman, author of *The Innocence of Trees* when introducing a 1996 UBC art exhibition by the same name announced, "A small but choice selection of the works of two of the twentieth century's greatest painters, both women, both raised in B.C.", Emily Carr and Agnes Martin. Agnes Martin – mentioned here in the same breath as Emily Carr! Emily Carr, yes, but who is Agnes Martin? Although to us not as familiar, she happens to be indeed a most esteemed artist collected and exhibited around the world with her work selling for literally tens of millions of dollars. In fact, according to the *Ottawa Citizen* she was "the woman often described as the most celebrated painter ever born in Canada."

As it turned out Agnes Martin took a circuitous route to reach her level of acclaim, described once as "an iconic figure...in thrall to a higher aesthetic purpose." As we look back upon the early life of Agnes, we find that this artist "a major figure in post war American abstraction", grew up in Vancouver, in fact grew up in Vancouver's West End attending Dawson Elementary School and King George High School. What is also intriguing is that her days in Vancouver, beginning at age seven through to twenty-one in 1933, reveal the fact she was an outstanding athlete, in



fact one of Vancouver's elites who in 1932 was invited to compete at the Olympic trials for a place on Canada's Olympic team. At this time the thought of her as a professional artist and the magnitude of what she was to become was far afield, in fact it would not commence until she was into her thirties, then living in the U.S. But prior to her well documented art career where in the U.S. she is considered a "national treasure", there unfolds another as yet untold story.



King George High School
Vancouver, B.C., Canada
Attended 1926-1929

Following the death of her father, seven-year-old Agnes along with her mother and three siblings moved from their Saskatchewan farm ultimately arriving in Vancouver's West End in 1919. For Agnes life as a young girl was difficult. Her only "parents" were her mother of whom Agnes said, "She hated me, God how she hated me" and grandfather, who she remembers "didn't talk to me", he a man who apparently lived by the Bible. Yet she says, "It was a good life – she had freedom". Yes, freedom without much parental attention. As it happened, her mother's and grandfather's coldness became in the words of a compatriot "the kind of distance (she) could bear and eventually emulate".

These would be formative years for Agnes. This was especially the case with her relationship with her mother, "Silence was her mother's weapon and used it ruthlessly", was revealed in an interview. Agnes felt she had been emotionally abused "yet the enforced solitude fostered her self-reliance...while discipline and renunciation were the characteristics that she would carry throughout her life. "

At age fourteen in 1926 and entering King George High School, Agnes began to make a name for herself in athletics as at the annual Playground Gala Swimming Championships at English Bay, her Haro team "took third place in the meet due to the fine performance of Agnes Martin." At the same time Agnes, in grade nine, was a one-woman show for King George in a basketball game against New Westminster's Duke of Connaught "King George girls register their first win...due to Agnes Martin who scored all of their points." Now that is domination!

At fifteen, competing for the West End's Haro playground team (this was located at Bute and Haro), Agnes was named Senior Girls Champion at the Gala Swimming Championships, this year held at Lost Lagoon. Meanwhile, this now grade ten scoring star on King George's girls basketball team competing against the top high school players in the city, scored 24 of the team's 26 points in a 26-

AGNES MARTIN STARS.

Trapp had the edge all the way in their tilt against King George leading 20-10 at half time. The New Westminster boys did not seem to be playing in their usual aggressive style and at times, especially during the latter part of the second half, the West Enders controlled the play. Briggs shone at guard for the losers. Fairbanks, of the same side, bagged eight points, with Matheson getting nine and Smith eight for the winners.

The South Vancouver Magee girls' game was featured by the absence of fouls.

No penalties were called against South Vancouver during the four sessions while only three were scored against the Magee side.

King Edward started like a whirlwind against Connaught and led 19-2 at the end of the first period. From then on they slackened up, and although they kept adding a few each period, could never get going in the same manner in which they started out. Effie Silverthorne topped the scores with 23 of her side's 39.

Agnes Martin was in a scoring mood in the King George-North Vancouver game for she ran in 24 of her team's 26 points to bring victory to the West Enders. Iris Fortin shone at guard for the winners. Julia Fromme and Jean Knight were best for the North Shore squad.

The Vancouver Sun
March 7, 1928

King George and Magee had also a very close game with the final victory going to the former, due largely to the excellent shooting of Agnes Martin and the clever guarding of Vancessa O'Shea. Magee led in the first quarter, but their guards seemed a little lax in watching for rebounds which permitted their opponents to score several times.

The Province
February 25, 1928

13 victory over North Vancouver High School. And against Magee, Agnes "scored many of her 23 points on rebound shots" as the West Enders were victorious 33-24.

Agnes' mother supported the family by renovating and re-selling houses which meant the four Martin kids were often left to their own devices. Young Agnes would have spent considerable time playing sports at the Haro Street playground, (she later served as the Haro playground director at age 19) and swimming at English Bay where the coaches, teammates and competition likely provided a sense of "belonging" and an energy outlet. Certainly, her mother and grandfather did not seem interested in sports.

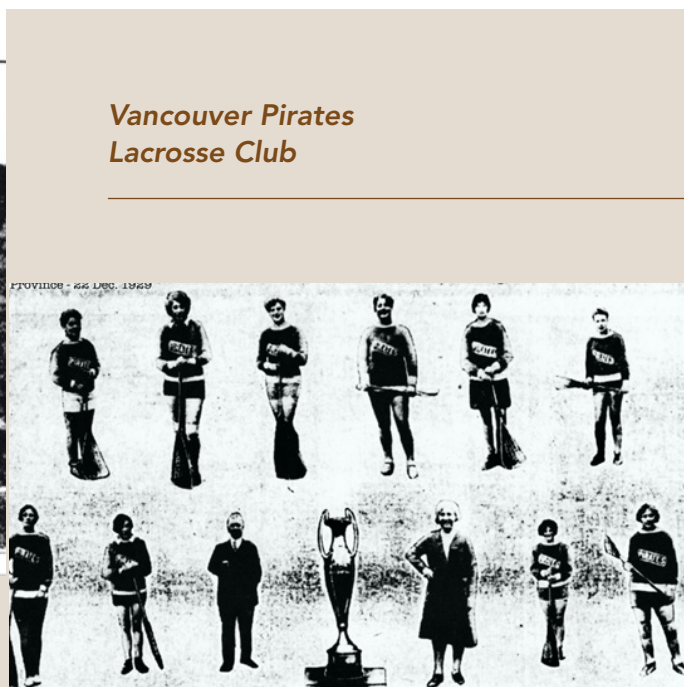
This was also an interesting decade to be attending high school at King George as at this time Agnes would have been cognizant of the exploits of the Vancouver Amazons women's hockey team. These "older" girls many of whom were former King George students, not only had created the Amazons but for several years were the stars on this acclaimed B.C. team. Undoubtedly, Agnes would have admired these kindred West Enders as they made their mark. In addition, during her years at King George the high school's boy's hockey team was in the midst of its twelve consecutive Vancouver and B.C. high school hockey championships. These players would have been her classmates with teacher Mr. C.H. Corkum providing the energy and direction behind this and other King George sports teams. She would also likely have known of King George's track and soccer star Quene Yip who had just graduated from the school a few months prior to Agnes entering grade nine. It was indeed an interesting time to be a student at this small West End high school located on Burrard Street across from St. Pauls Hospital.



1933 Graduation Photo
Whatcom High School

Just after her sixteenth birthday, Agnes was embarking upon yet another sport, field lacrosse, with the highly rated Vancouver Pirates ladies' lacrosse team. Likely the team's youngest player, she scored all three goals in a 3-1 victory over the strong Richmond Milk Maids team. Later that season Agnes teamed with UBC basketball star Rettie Tingley to lead the Pirates to the league championship and the Rudy Grauer Cup. In the championship game against Richmond before 2000 fans, Martin, Tingley and Etta Hunter scored in the Pirates victory. This team took charge of local women's lacrosse in that they happened to be an assembly of some of the finest athletes in the city.

Sixteen and now in grade eleven at King George, Agnes with guidance from coach Percy Norman was swimming and diving for the Meralomas (a well-known Vancouver swim club) in search of the Province



Cup and Vancouver amateur swimming supremacy. The Province newspaper announced, "while in the ladies' events their (Meralomas) outstanding entry will be Agnes Martin, holder of the B.C. record for 50 yards for girls 16 and over". In a key event for first place in the 1928 Lower Mainland swimming league, Agnes with Meralomas finished second in diving, second in the 50 yards and first in the 100 yards freestyle. "Agnes Martin stars" announced The Province as she was Meraloma's team leader in total points in the ladies' events. Twenty years later upon his retirement, legendary coach Percy Norman remembered the early thirties. "Agnes Martin and Lena Clampitt," he said, "they were two of the best." After many years, praise indeed from one who would know.

Despite her good showing with the Meralomas that swimming season and her later recollections, there does not appear to be any documentation in local newspapers or books on Meralomas or swimming history that indicates she attended Olympic trials in Toronto for Canada's 1928 Olympic team, much

less qualify. The definitive history of swimming in Canada authored by Jack Kelso indicates that even if she did travel to the trials she was not among the top finishers in the qualifying races. As it turned out, only one female swimmer made the Canadian team and she was from Ontario. We can speculate and say sixteen-year-old Agnes was perhaps invited to Toronto to compete at the 1928 Olympic trials but it was this event she was unable to afford to attend.

Back in high school basketball for grade eleven "King George girls were far too good for North Vancouver...Agnes Martin and Iris Fortin were the scoring aces for the winners, each making 14 points." However, following grade eleven at King George, Agnes, now living at 1033 Melville in the West End, elected (for reasons unknown) to leave King George (officially April 1929). At this time, she was considering becoming a teacher so Normal School (teacher's training) was likely in her plans but that would be in the future. She was now working and heavily engaged in sports. She continued to swim and





*Agnes would win
The Wrigley Trophy
B.C.'s One Mile Championship
In two consecutive years
1931 & 1932*



dive for Meralomas winning sprint championships in both West Vancouver and Deep Cove, playing basketball for club teams and resuming lacrosse with the Pirates in 1929 when they again proved to be the class of the league. In a 6-3 victory over Richmond at Athletic Park "Agnes Martin shone brightly at centre" as she and Helen Little each scored three goals for the winners who would go on to win their third consecutive provincial women's lacrosse championship.

The fall of 1929 saw seventeen-year-old Agnes reach new heights in woman's basketball as she was now with the Neons in the Vancouver and District Senior 'A' league, the top woman's league in the province. The year previous, five-foot six-inch Agnes had played on the B.C. Senior 'B' champion Mountain View basketball team, so two champion teams in two sports lacrosse and basketball in two years. She would continue to play both Senior 'A' and Senior 'B' basketball for the next two years as one of the city's better players. It would have been difficult if not impossible to imagine at this time this woman would later have books, documentaries, biographies, even songs written about her – as an artist.

The following year it was reported in The Province that Agnes was invited to compete at the women's Vancouver trials for the Canadian track and field championships joining the likes of Mary Frizzell and Lillian Palmer. Also, at this time, now with the Vancouver Amateur Swim Club, Agnes starred in the club's decisive victory over UBC as The Vancouver Sun reported, "Miss Martin, a slip of a girl, carried off three firsts and just failed by one point of tying for the honour." (the Cox Shield). That same year eighteen-year-old Agnes finished first in two events at a North Vancouver swimming meet where she was also co-winner of the "bathing

beauty contest". It would be lacrosse, basketball, swimming, softball and track that would be the sports one would see associated with Agnes in the newspapers of the day. She even competed together with her brother Ronald in the canoe events at the 1931 Deep Cove diving and racing Regatta, scoring in the process the most aggregate points (finishing first in four different events) besting well-known all-around athlete Doris Parkes.

Even though characterized as a "loner" Agnes could well have had friendships with fellow competitors (like Doris Parkes) and she did have siblings including Ronald, sister Maribel and younger brother Malcolm with whom she could relate.

She did recall in later life interviews that while at King George she did go to parties and dances and did date (then stopped dating). It appears she seemed to have the not uncommon conflict of the freedom to be promiscuous (her word) versus the moral and religious teaching of her grandfather. However, when recalling her grandfather, despite the fact he tended to ignore her she claimed she liked him and was influenced by him as he could well have facilitated her independence. We can also notice that when later interviewed Agnes could seem to both understate and overstate and generally be paradoxical in her recollections and portrayals, not always having an eye for accuracy.

It came to pass that Agnes began to visit her sister Maribel in Bellingham, Washington, helping her through a difficult pregnancy. Agnes liked the US and its little more "laxed" culture but she wasn't far from Vancouver, frequently crossing the border back "home" to engage in what appeared to be her passion, competitive swimming and lacrosse, as she "bagged a couple" in a Pirates win over the Salmonbellies in May of 1931.

The August 1931 Vancouver Sun announced that Agnes, "fresh from her recent successful conquest in two B.C. sprint championships" had won the Wrigley Trophy as the first woman to cross the finish line at B.C.'s One Mile swimming championship. This feat was duplicated the following year (1932) as before 2000 spectators, she won her second consecutive One Mile championship and the "handsome" Wrigley Cup, all well documented with pictures of Agnes in the newspaper. This particular event not only brought together the Lower Mainland's best swimmers but received excellent media coverage.

Nineteen thirty-one had been a busy and successful year for Agnes as an athlete but July of 1932 provided an even further highlight. She found herself in select company training for the swimming trials for a spot on Canada's 1932 Olympic team. She ranked with swimming notables Doris Parkes, George Burrows and Ernie Peden as among those top British Columbians competing in Vancouver and Victoria for a place on Canada's team which was being formed for the games in Los Angeles. Agnes was now B.C. record-holder in the sprints and was swimming better than ever, considered by The Province to be the "stiffest competition for the eastern stars." She did perform well at the trials but fell short of qualifying, just edged out in the 100-meter freestyle final with the media stating, "The Vancouver girl giving the easterners a battle that will linger long in the memories of the spectators."

Swimming Tomorrow

The Vancouver Sun - 15 July 1932



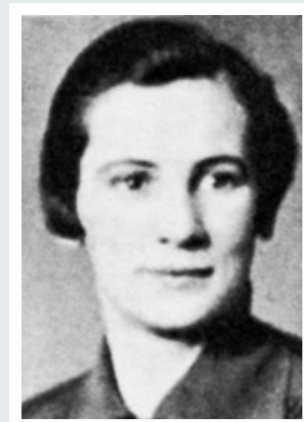
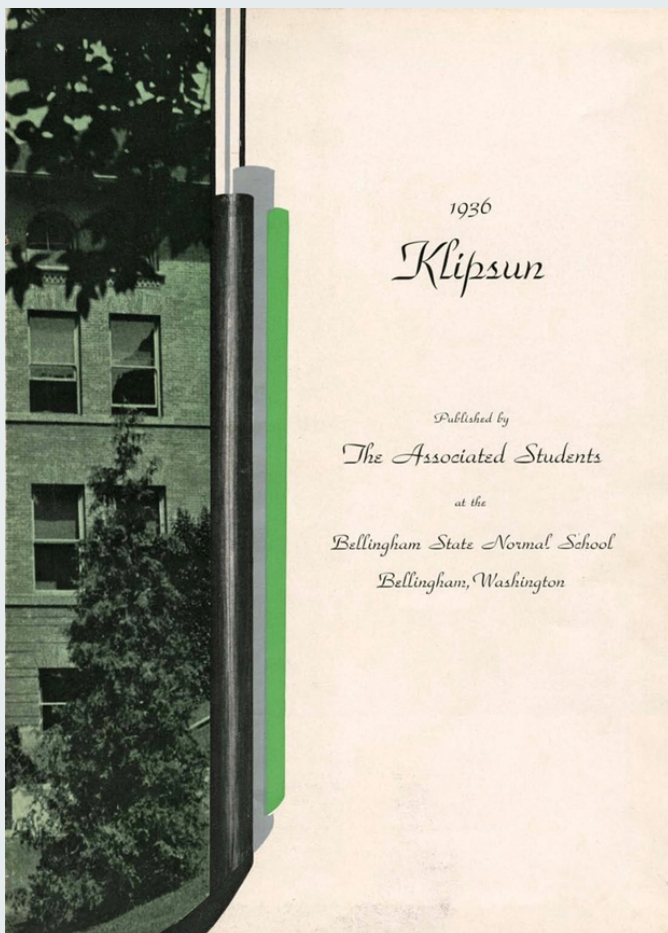
Here are some of British Columbia's chief hopes who will swim and dive against Canada's best at the Olympic trials tomorrow afternoon. Left to right, back row: Ralph Risk, Crescent; Syd Summers, V.A.S.C.; Carl Baillie, Trail; Dick Wyndham, V.A.S.C.; Norman Cox, Olympic coach. Front row: Allena Clappitt, V.A.S.C.; Mary McLean, Varsity; Agnes "Iggity" Martin, V.A.S.C.; Marion Moffatt, V.A.S.C.; Betty Bryan, V.A.S.C.; Harry Andison, Varsity; Jack Jacques, V.A.S.C.

It was the next month however, at the Annual Crescent Beach Gala, "Vancouver Amateur Swimming Club Star" Agnes Martin defended her 100-yard freestyle title by winning with a time 4/10 of a second faster than the winning time at the Olympic trials! "She was cheered by the fans till the echoes rang." And later that month Agnes again won three sprint titles at the annual West Vancouver meet as being among the city's best swimmers she consistently dominated these events. Her popularity and media exposure also revealed she had a nickname "Iggity", which could be heard from among those fans cheering her on. Considering her homelife and the ensuing drive to succeed, this acclaim and attention must have been gratifying and esteem building.

In November 1932 Agnes was enrolling at Bellingham's Whatcom High School to complete her secondary education. Her family was living in the West End at 1632 Nelson Street but having failed to complete

her grade twelve at King George she at age twenty, moving on her own, decided if she wanted to teach in the US, she at least required a high school diploma which she attained from Whatcom in the spring of 1933. Just prior to leaving however, in August and September of 1932, she was busy, winning two events at the West Vancouver Swimming Gala, competing in the annual eight mile Deep Cove canoe races and winning her second Wrigley Cup and gold medal.

Attending high school in Bellingham, Agnes continued back across the border to compete for the Vancouver Amateur Swim Club winning the Bennett Cup setting a 100-yard freestyle record equalling her own B.C. record set earlier in 1932. And early in 1933 her passion for swimming still strong, she was with Percy Norman's V.A.S.C. and the "best balanced and fastest swimming team to represent Vancouver", as it prepared to meet Washington Athletic Club in Seattle. Agnes and Marion Moffat were singled out for praise among the Canucks. One of Agnes' teammates at the time later observed that the rhythms of swimming (especially in competitions), head in and out of the water, loud then quiet, that beat, loud then quiet, were rhythms that would play out in her art and life.





Agnes Martin

Self-portrait

c. 1947

Encaustic on canvas

Private collection

Now living with a family in Bellingham, Agnes continued to pursue her teaching degree enrolling at Bellingham Teachers College, now Western Washington College of Education. At Teachers College she was known more for her athletic abilities, as an all-star basketball player also excelling in softball, swimming, volleyball and tennis, sports that made her known in Vancouver. Yet as she entered Teachers College Agnes continued to cross the border, that swimming fire still burning, as during the summer of 1933 she swam for the B.C. champion 200-meter relay team then joined the likes of Alleena Clampitt and Marion Moffat at the Kelowna Regatta where she scored the highest number of points earning the right to reign as “Lady of the Lake.” Lady of the Lake! One wonders how her mother, grandfather and former King George class mates were responding to this “star status” achieved by their Agnes.

Agnes did graduate from (Western Washington) in June 1936, and at age twenty-four quickly embarked upon a teaching career in small schools and small towns in the U.S. Pacific Northwest. But it was while attending the College Agnes evolved in certain ways when she met and lived with the Kane sisters. These sisters had “strong and uncommon” views on the potential of women and in many ways influenced Agnes cultivating an awareness of the increasingly unstable world of the late thirties.

Armed with a profession, Agnes could now live and teach in the US while maintaining her relationship with the Kane sisters, especially Mildred who offered emotional and at times financial support. But in 1941 Agnes decided to upgrade her teaching certificate specializing in creative work for children, so packing up her Ford she drove with Mildred to New York to enroll at Teachers College at Columbia University. Her West End days now “in her rear-view mirror”, it was this New York experience that was the beginning of her transformation. It was now for the first time she was exposed to modern art and began considering a career as an artist.

Following her graduation from Columbia, Agnes both painted and taught for the next five years then in 1946 moved to New Mexico where in 1947 she won the Taos Art School Award and experienced her first exhibitions in 1947 and 1948. She did maintain some relations with her family visiting Vancouver several times during the 1940s and 1950s including her brother Malcolm's funeral in 1951.

Returning to New York in 1951 and living in an artist community, Agnes was introduced to the new wave Abstract Expressionism, a form of art that had recently transformed New York and would also transform Agnes. With her remarkable energy now flowing in a new direction, she began to develop an abstract style of her own which would embrace her new-found interest in Eastern philosophy whose ideas of egolessness and humility could be read in her work, these works since prominent in the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

In 1953 Agnes moved to Taos, New Mexico, dedicating herself to painting full time. Although she did not recall with fondness her work during this period and did not intend to show or sell it, these are among her revered paintings and did bring her, her first success.

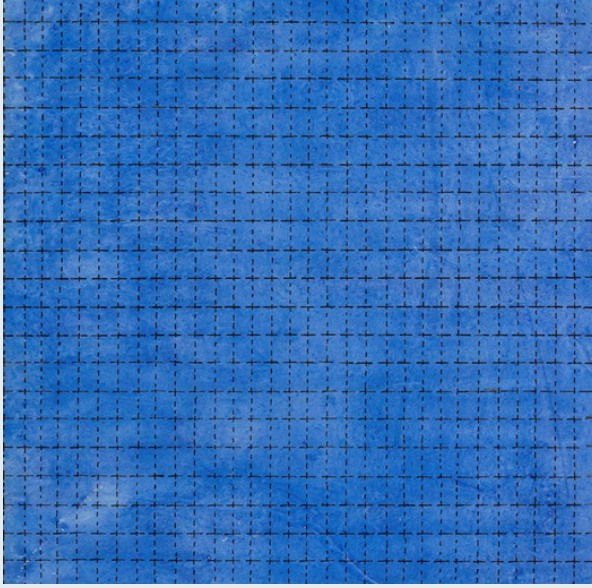


Untitled

(Landscape south of Sante Fe, N.M.)

Watercolor and ink on paper

Private collection



Starlight

Watercolor, ink on paper

1963

Private collection

Back in New York between 1957 and 1967, Agnes was able to establish herself as a successful professional painter flourishing on the New York art scene as part of the “Generation of New York Artists”. But this “deeply perceptive human being” was presented with personal challenges – mental health issues. One could speculate that her early home life’s traumas and stress had left their mark. While she did live in an artist “refuge” and was influenced by the generation of American Abstract Expressionists, it was still for her a lonely life.

During this period, she described her formless way of painting by saying, “It describes the subtle emotions that are beyond words, like music you know, represents our abstract emotions.” She was quite happy with her new grid-like compositions which for her represented a culmination of experiences including her early life in Vancouver and apparently in the late 1960s began to repudiate and even destroy much of her earlier work. Her mental health issues continued as she suffered periodic episodes, some serious, during the 1960s and likely the remainder of her life. A compatriot pointed out her “acute attention to life’s quiet rhythms characterized her work which offer no clues to a turbulent life of an artist.”

In 1967 Agnes suddenly left New York leaving painting and her established career behind. “I had established my market and I felt free to leave,” for what became a solitary, simple life. She bought a Dodge pickup and spent the next eighteen months mostly alone, exploring and camping in the U.S. and western Canada which did include Vancouver. She later returned to rural New Mexico living an austere and secluded lifestyle, ultimately on land owned by her friend Donald Woodman. Although she was no longer painting, her art was still being exhibited internationally as interest in her work never waned, in fact it was growing. She had developed a corps of devoted admirers many of whom described her as



Agnes Martin

New Mexico, 1974

Photo:

Gianfranco Gorgoni

quiet, contemplative and whose favourite virtue was humility. But in 1974 she discovered a new mode of expression which she would continue to communicate for thirty more years...she began to paint again. Her work was exploring themes of beauty, happiness and innocence, hoping people would respond to positive emotions. A biographer later noted, “the deification of Agnes Martin has been abetted by...her compelling persona (and) an enigmatic yet undeniable influential creative force.”

Yet in the late seventies and early eighties and still living remotely without many of life’s comforts, she did experience a particularly difficult breakdown – “mental chaos” – but with intervention and treatment she emerged relatively safely. Her unusual resilience, selfabsorption and quest for the struggle may have been inherited from her mother who Agnes claimed was also the source of her psychological problems. As an aside, because she did not look athletic and her athletic life in Vancouver was not well known, her athletic abilities at age seventy amazed people.

By 1984 at age seventy-two she was experiencing material success for the first time but continued her austere lifestyle. “I have tons of money”, she told an interviewer, “I’ve made millions. It doesn’t mean a thing to me. All I want is a good car.” She had done a significant amount of travelling including several trips across Canada, including five days on the MackenzieRiver with her friend Woodman, as it could be said Canada was still in her bones.

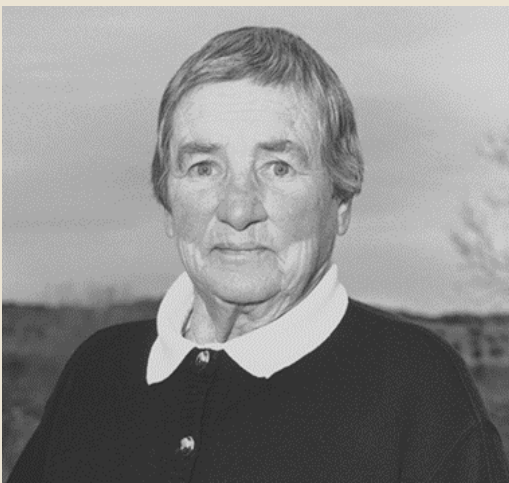
Moving from rural New Mexico back to Taos in 1993, Agnes was still working, travelling and painting but was now a little more social “lets do lunch!” and could be seen driving around town in her white BMW. She also became more philanthropic, giving to youth, sports and nature conservation as her fondness for kids, sports, and nature which was fostered in Vancouver, never left her despite a dominant yet somewhat solitary career in art. From the 1970s through to present she would have been the subject of several international retrospective exhibitions including New York city’s Guggenheim Museum exhibition in 2016 at which her 1965 “Orange Grove” sold for \$13.7 million dollars. Later in 2021, another of her pieces sold this time for \$17.7 million.

Unfortunately, Agnes did not live to witness these last two major sales as she had passed away of heart failure in Taos, New Mexico, December 2004, at age ninety-two. Despite the challenges of her mental condition, it was her fortitude and commitment that enabled her to live such a long and productive life. When asked by an interviewer how she viewed her life she paused, then answered, “Well done, Agnes”.

In 1998, a career highlight for Agnes was reached when she received the National Medal of Arts for contemporary painting presented by President Bill Clinton, an award that is said to be the equivalent of an Oscar for lifetime achievement. Introducing Agnes on this prestigious occasion President Clinton quoted her as once saying, “Everyone sees beauty and art is a way to respond.” His praise also acknowledged the fact she was a naturalized American born in Saskatchewan (did not mention Vancouver however or her previous life as an acclaimed athlete). The question in Canada being asked at that time was; Why isn’t Canada rejoicing at the honours that have been bestowed upon this woman with Canadian roots? Although we did honor her in 2004, the year she died, Canada it seems has taken few steps to regain this longlost daughter. It is true by age 21 in 1933 she had pretty much set Canada aside, advancing her schooling in the US where she had a strong desire to live and did become an American citizen at age thirty-eight in 1950. Though she experienced a full life growing up in Vancouver’s West End with extraordinary success and attention as an athlete, she did not have an attentive, happy, home life and despite periodic visits and soul-searching trips to Canada, would not have had many close relationships with her Vancouver people. That was a distinct, former life. She had taken on a new, different life in New York and New Mexico which happened to be one of distancing herself from the life that brought other artists into the public eye. Moreover, her New York dealer was not interested in promoting her Canadian roots, probably thought it was no more than a footnote, incidental. She became an American having found her calling as an American. For the lifestyle and freedom she sought, she felt the U.S. was the better place for her.

Yet it could be said Canada let her “get away”, late and light on exhibiting her work despite it being seen all over the world. In addition, no one, apparently not even the art world had taken a “deep dive” into the unforeseen and little-known life of Agnes Martin growing up in Vancouver.

That is where we come in.



Agnes was awarded the National Medal of Arts from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1998.

Agnes Martin 1988, Photo: Donald Woodman

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