

Anne Sexton:

An Inventory of Her Collection at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Sexton, Anne, 1928-1974
Title:	Anne Sexton Art Collection
Dates:	1967, undated
Extent:	3 boxes, 8 oversize folders (23 items)
Abstract:	The Anne Sexton Art Collection consists of fifteen oil paintings by Anne Sexton, and eight lithographic proofs of the same image by Barbara Swan. The paintings by Sexton, all undated, were created as a part of her therapy.
Call Number:	Art Collection AR-00248
Language:	No linguistic material present
Access:	Open for research. A minimum of twenty-four hours is required to pull art materials to the Reading Room.

Administrative Information

Acquisition:	Gifts (G621, G859), 1980
Processed by:	Helen Young, 2002
Repository:	Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Biographical Sketch

Born Anne Gray Harvey, Anne Sexton (1928-1974) was the youngest of three daughters born to a well-off couple in Weston, Massachusetts. Sexton's father owned and ran a wool business and her mother, well educated and intelligent, maintained an active social schedule of parties and charity events. The sisters were not close, each vying for the attention of their busy parents and pursuing their own interests. Anne's behavior as a child, seemingly always in motion, making noise, and looking disheveled, excluded her from many of the family's social activities.

In junior high school, Sexton lost her awkwardness and became the center of a gang of girlfriends. Her first attempt at poetry resulted from a breakup with long-time boyfriend Jack McCarthy. During her senior year in high school, Sexton wrote more poetry, some of which was published in the school paper. When Sexton's mother essentially accused her of plagiarizing the poems, Sexton stopped writing poetry altogether for ten years.

After high school, in 1947, Sexton attended finishing school at the Garland School in Boston. While there, she became engaged and began planning a big wedding. However, in 1948, Sexton met and fell in love with Alfred Muller Sexton II, nicknamed Kayo. In August of the same year, afraid that she was pregnant, Sexton and Kayo, on the advice of her mother, eloped to North Carolina. Returning from their honeymoon, the young couple spent the next few years moving back and forth between their parents' homes. Kayo dropped his pre-med studies after a few months and found work with a wool firm. In 1951, Kayo was shipped overseas with the naval reserves, and in the fall of 1952, Sexton joined him in San Francisco, where his ship was being overhauled, and almost immediately became pregnant. They returned to Massachusetts for the Christmas holidays and Sexton remained at her parents' home for the remainder of her pregnancy. Linda Gray Sexton was born on July 21, 1953, and shortly thereafter the Sextons bought a house in Newton Lower Falls, Massachusetts, and Kayo accepted a position with his father-in-law's wool company. Two years later, Joyce Ladd Sexton was born on August 4, 1955.

Shortly after Joyce's birth, Sexton began a year-long slide into the depression that would plague her for the rest of her life. Feeling disoriented and agitated, she sought help from Dr. Martha Brunner-Orne who diagnosed post-partum depression and prescribed medication. After five months of treatment Sexton developed a paralyzing fear of being alone with her children. She became increasingly prone to attacks of blinding rage which often led to abusive behavior towards Linda. Afraid that she would actually kill the child, Sexton finally confided some of her problems to her family and they rallied to support her. During Kayo's business trips, his sister would stay with her, and Kayo's father offered to help cover some of the expenses of therapy. Sexton's parents sent their housemaid to help with the housework and also sent money. However, this practical help did not solve Sexton's problems and in July of 1956 she entered Westwood Lodge, a private hospital, for three weeks. While at Westwood Lodge, Sexton met Dr. Brunner's son, Dr. Orne, who was to be her psychiatrist for the next eight years.

Sexton was released from Westwood Lodge on August 3, 1956, but her condition continued to decline. Dr. Orne placed her in Glenside Mental Institution after she took an overdose of Nembutal in November. Sometime in 1956, Sexton began writing poetry. She showed the poems to Orne who vigorously encouraged her to continue writing. Over the course of 1957, Sexton brought over sixty completed poems to Orne for approval. In the fall of 1957, she began attending an adult education poetry workshop taught by John Holmes. By the end of the year, Holmes suggested that Sexton seek publication. In April of 1958, *The Fiddlehead Review* published "Eden Revisited."

Sexton continued to attend Holmes' seminar through 1958. It was there that she met and became close friends with Maxine Kumin. That same year, Sexton attended the Antioch Writer's Conference, where she worked with W.D. Snodgrass, and took a graduate poetry writing seminar with Robert Lowell. In 1959, she received a Robert Frost Scholarship to attend the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference in Vermont. In 1960, this work culminated in the publication of a collection of poems, *To Bedlam and Partway Back*. Well received, *Bedlam* was the first of ten collections of verse Sexton published in her lifetime.

In 1961, Sexton received a Radcliffe Institute fellowship as did her friend Maxine Kumin (1961-1963). The two women became part of a circle of close friends that included the fiction writer Tillie Olsen and the painter Barbara Swan. Sexton bought one of Swan's first lithographs, and the two later collaborated on various projects, including some broadsides, jackets for three works (*Live or Die*, *The Book of Folly*, and *The Death Notebooks*), and illustrations for *Transformations*.

Over the next fourteen years Sexton wrote poetry, short stories, a major theatrical production, and presented her poetry at readings, alone and with musical accompaniment. She taught poetry courses at Boston University, Oberlin College, and Wayland High School. She became a major presence in the American poetry scene and helped earn respect for women poets in general. In 1965, she was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and in 1967 she received both the Shelley Memorial Award and the Pulitzer Prize for *Live or Die* (1966). In 1968, Sexton was awarded honorary membership in the Harvard chapter of Phi Beta Kappa, the first woman to receive this award, and in 1969 she was made a member of the Radcliffe chapter. She received honorary doctorates from Tufts University and Fairfield University in 1970, and from Regis College in 1973.

Despite these and other accolades, Sexton continued to struggle with her mental illness, taking pills and drinking heavily to combat her fears. To the dismay of many, but perhaps the surprise of none, she took her own life on October 4, 1974. Sexton's daughters and friends published several volumes of poems and letters after her death, including *45 Mercy Street* (1975), *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters* (1977), and *Words for Dr. Y.: Uncollected Poems with Three Short Stories* (1978).

Sources:

Middlebrook, Diane Wood. *Anne Sexton: A Biography*. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.

Cowart, David. "Anne Sexton." *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. 5: American Poets since World War II, Part 2, L-Z*, ed. Donald J. Genner. Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1980.

Scope and Contents

The Anne Sexton Art Collection consists of fifteen oil paintings by Anne Sexton, and eight lithographic proofs of the same image by Barbara Swan. The paintings by Sexton, all undated, were created as a part of her therapy. Seven of the proofs by Barbara Swan represent states of a broadside publication of Sexton's poem "For the Year of the Insane" (1967). The eighth proof is for a poster for Sexton's 1967 appearance at the International Poetry Forum. The works are divided into two series: I. Paintings by Anne Sexton, and II. Prints by Barbara Swan for "For the Year of the Insane." They are arranged by accession number. Titles of the paintings were supplied by the cataloger.

Related Material

The Ransom Center also has extensive Anne Sexton materials in its Manuscripts Collection, its Library, its Photography Collection, and its Personal Effects Collection.

Series I. Paintings by Anne Sexton, undated

- Accession Number: 81.128.1** [Landscape with purple mountain, water, and trees along shore line]. Undated. 1 painting: oil on canvas board, 30.1 x 40.5 cm. **Box** 1.1
- Accession Number: 81.128.2** [Fireplace with fire]. Undated. 1 painting: oil on canvas board, 30.1 x 40.5 cm. **Box** 1.2
- Accession Number: 81.128.3** [Landscape with lighthouse, shore, and water, in fog]. Undated. 1 painting: oil on canvas board, 35.3 x 45.5 cm. **Box** 1.3
- Accession Number: 81.128.4** [Landscape with bare tree and rock wall in foreground, field, trees with autumn foliage in background]. Undated. 1 painting: oil on canvas board, 35.3 x 45.5 cm. **Box** 1.4
- Accession Number: 81.128.5** [Bust portrait of young woman with blond hair]. Undated. 1 painting: oil on canvas paper, 50.8 x 40.7 cm. **Box** 1.5
- Accession Number: 81.128.6** [Still life with white penguin and deer figurines]. Undated. 1 painting: oil on canvas paper, 40.7 x 50.8 cm. **Box** 2.1
- Accession Number: 81.128.7** [Still life with animal figurine and branch with leaves]. Undated. 1 painting: oil on canvas paper, 50.8 x 40.7 cm. **Box** 2.2
- Accession Number: 81.128.8** [Still life with male bust sculpture on drapery]. Undated. 1 painting: oil on canvas paper, 50.8 x 40.7 cm. **Box** 2.3
- Accession Number: 81.128.9** [Bust portrait of woman with obscured face, green blouse]. Undated. 1 painting: oil on canvas board, 50.5 x 40.3 cm. **Box** 2.4
- Accession Number: 81.128.10** [Self portrait: bust portrait with blue blouse]. Undated. 1 painting: oil on canvas board, 50.5 x 40.3 cm. **Box** 2.5
- Accession Number: 81.128.11** [Landscape with red mountains, blue water, blue sky]. Undated. 1 painting: oil on canvas board, 40.3 x 50.5 cm. **Box** 2.6
- Accession Number: 81.128.12** [Landscape with hills, two figures, at dusk]. Undated. 1 painting: oil on canvas board, 40.2 x 50.6 cm. **Box** 3.1
- Accession Number: 81.128.13** [Still life with round vase, Japanese fan, and dish]. Undated. 1 painting: oil on canvas board, 40.4 x 50.5 cm. **Box** 3.2
- Accession Number: 81.128.14** [Bent street light on corner (with Japanese characters?)]. Undated. 1 painting: oil on canvas board, 50.7 x 40.3 cm. **Box** 3.3
- Accession Number: 81.128.15** [Abstract of angry woman's head and angry man's head angrily confronting each other]. Undated. 1 painting: oil on canvas board, 40.7 x 50.2 cm. **Box** 3.4

Series II. Prints by Barbara Swan for "For the Year of the Insane," 1967

- Accession Number: 81.128.16** International Poetry Forum presents Anne Sexton, October 24, 1967, 8:30 p.m., Carnegie Lecture Hall [broadside with Swan's double head portrait of Sexton holding rosary beads, "Artist's Proof"]. 1967. 1 print: lithograph, 65 x 45 cm. **Location**
Flat file
- Accession Number: 81.128.17** [For the Year of the Insane: a Prayer; with Swan's double head portrait of Sexton holding rosary beads. "Trial Proof 2nd State" without text]. 1967. 1 print: lithograph, 45.2 x 58 cm. **Location**
Flat file
- Accession Number: 81.128.18** [For the Year of the Insane: a Prayer; with Swan's double head portrait of Sexton holding rosary beads. "Artist's Trial Proof 1st State" without text]. 1967. 1 print: lithograph, 48.2 x 52.5 cm. **Location**
Flat file
- Accession Number: 81.128.19-23** For the Year of the Insane: a Prayer. Boston: Impressions Workshop [5 broadsides; with Swan's double head portrait of Sexton holding rosary beads. "Poet's Proof" 6/10-10/10]. 1967. 5 prints: lithographs, 75.1 x 53.7 cm. **Location**
Flat file