

Kenneth Warnock Evett

December 1, 1913 — May 28, 2005

Kenneth Warnock Evett, 91, Professor Emeritus in the Fine Arts Department, died May 28, 2005 in Ithaca, New York. Professor Evett was born in Loveland, Colorado on December 1, 1913, the middle son of Charles Evett and Sarah Warnock Evett. He and his two brothers, Paul and Robert, left their mountain roots to move east in pursuit of careers in arts and letters.

The memories of his childhood were rich with talks of the family's willful animals (his father ran a livery stable in Estes Park), the equally capricious Model-T, and his mother's love of classical music and literature as well as her devotion to watercolor painting. He also recalled the pleasures of fishing for brook trout in Estes Park, playing tennis on a court the boys had carved out of a hillside, and riding on horseback through the magnificent landscape of the Rockies.

Professor Evett's first encounter with the American art scene occurred when he was encouraged to show some of his drawings to Thomas Hart Benton, who happened to be visiting wealthy Texas neighbors in Estes Park. Benton recommended Kenneth for a scholarship to the newly founded Fine Arts Center in Colorado Springs, where he met a colorful assortment of artistic celebrities and local aristocrats. He also met Betty Schluss, recently graduated from Tufts University, who would become his companion for 66 years. They enjoyed a heady mix of high-spirited Bohemian life and forays into the Rockies to picnic, sketch and ski.

After a year teaching art to Denver junior high students, Professor Evett was awarded a commission from the WPA's Federal Section of Fine Arts to paint a mural for the Humboldt, Nebraska Post Office. In all, he painted six murals for post offices in Colorado, Kansas and Nebraska. In 1941, with the onset of WWII, Professor Evett sought work in Woodstock, New York. After a year, he was lured back to Colorado Springs where, despite six-day weeks of exhausting and numbing work as a welder, again was swept up in the stimulating world of artists, musicians, and local elites. The Depression, the role of Russia in the war, the work in the factory, his left-leaning friends, and his Presbyterian sense of righteousness (instilled in him by his devoutly religious mother) all pushed Kenneth to join the Party. He left a few years later alarmed by threats against his life and appalled when Stalin's atrocities became known.

After a year's stay in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1944, Professor Evett taught at Salem College in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. A year later, he was hired by a wealthy patron of the arts to direct a small artist's colony housed in

a rambling structure several miles outside Hot Springs, Virginia. Throughout these troubled and turbulent years, Kenneth continued to paint and to seek ways to make a living through his painting.

In the fall of 1948, while Professor Evett was meeting with Antoinette Kraushaar, his dealer and the owner of the prestigious New York gallery, she answered a call from John Hartell, Chairman of the Fine Arts Department at Cornell University. Did she perhaps know of a painter who might be able to fill in for a semester? Thus began Professor Evett's thirty-one years of affiliation with Cornell, primarily devoted to teaching studio art, but also spent as a passionate Cornellian who helped organize art festivals, spoke at symposia, published in *Epoch*, and helped save the A.D. White House from the wrecking ball. In addition, he was inordinately concerned with the fate of Cornell athletic teams, especially the football, basketball and hockey teams. He often remarked that his mood would rise or fall for days depending on the outcome of weekend games.

Professor Evett's artistic abilities and integrity received increasing public recognition during his years at Cornell. He had 12 one-man shows at Kraushaar and was represented in group shows at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Corcoran Museum of Art in Washington, D.C. His paintings are included in the permanent collections of the Newark Museum, the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute and the Montclair Museum, among many.

In 1954, Professor Evett won a nationwide-juried competition to paint three murals for the Lincoln, Nebraska State Capitol building rotunda. The award not only provided him with a substantial prize with which he took his family to Rome, Italy, to spend his first sabbatical year, but also brought him some unwelcome national-level publicity when a Nebraskan legislator offered mocking comments about the "modern" art in the capitol building.

Professor Evett's painting and drawing style moved through several phases, from densely painted realistic figurative works of the 1930s and 1940s, to the starker India ink drawings based on the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, to the sometimes apocalyptic sumi ink landscapes of the 1950s and back to intensely colored oil paintings of imaginary landscapes and mythic Greek scenes. He began painting watercolors from nature in the 1960s, at first somewhat free in the brush work and light in tonality. As he explored this difficult medium through the 1970s and 1980s, his images became more saturated with color, the draftsmanship more defined and the volumes of objects more pronounced. He and Betty traveled widely in Europe, the American West and along the coast of Maine, where he painted one or two watercolors each day, almost regardless of the weather, the terrain, or curious onlookers. Exposed to the elements and equipped only with a lightweight folding stool, a table of fine French paper, a few

tubes of paints, a jar of water and a single 1” brush, he painted directly from nature, never once making a pencil sketch to guide his hand.

Professor Evett was also a gifted writer. His essays on art and architecture published in *The New Republic* attracted the attention of New York magazines, one of which offered him a job as its full-time art critic. Although he could not play a note on any instrument, he loved music that ranged from the blues and jazz to classical music, especially the “sublime” Mozart. His fondness for Mozart became even more intense after he read the complete letters of Mozart. While his literary tastes were also eclectic, he particularly relished the humanity of Anthony Trollope’s novels and the beauty of Shakespeare’s sonnets. He was unusually articulate for a visually oriented person and his care with words marked and enriched his teaching style. He was open to and supportive of his students’ work and would sometimes buy their creations—a sign of affirmation.

Professor Evett lived a long and extraordinary life, and while he faced the genuine challenges of near poverty during the Depression, keeping a family intact through World War II, and functioning in the sometimes cut-throat environments of both the academic and art worlds, he knew he lived a charmed and privileged existence. He was ever grateful for his wife Betty’s years of love and support, and he took great pleasure in the lives of his children and grandchildren.

Professor Evett’s wife, Betty; his children, Daniel (Janet Snoyer), Elisa (John Miller), and Joel (Roberta Boylen); his grandchildren Jessica and Willem; and numerous cousins and their children survive him. His grandson, Peter Evett, predeceased him in 1995.

Office of the Dean of Faculty