

Donation of the Month

Object: Elsie Sterling Drawings & Photo
Catalog #: 1984.38.33, 157, 137, 162.1, 200, 267, & 209
Donor: Pan-American University



"Art school project, mid 1920s."

Elsie Mistie Sterling must have led an interesting but strange life. An accomplished artist who worked in many styles and mediums, she married an older man whom many people believed to be a charlatan and who held an uncanny sway over Elsie and her sisters. The extended family led a nomadic existence for over a decade before landing like autumn-blown leaves in Rogers.

The eldest of four daughters, Elsie Josephine Mistie (originally Missetich?) was born in Chicago on December 18, 1907, to Matthew and Pierina Mistie, immigrants from the Dalmatia region of Yugoslavia. Elsie became interested in art as a young girl, taking private art lessons and attending — she said “practically lived at” — the Art Institute of Chicago and the Vogue Commercial Art School, where she trained in various disciplines including painting, sculpture, etching, and the graphic arts. Her first commission was a cover illustration for the *Bystander of Cleveland* (1928).

In 1928 Elsie married Dr. Richard Arthur Sterling, a German immigrant and reputed vaudeville performer, movie producer and cameraman, motion picture color-process inventor, and Johns Hopkins-trained physician (although Johns Hopkins has no record of him). He was 31 years her senior.



"Stamps created for the National Recovery Act, 1930s."

According to Richard, the Depression saw the loss of his Hollywood fortune. In 1929 the couple loaded their possessions into knapsacks and began a 14-year, 7,800-mile nomadic journey through the South. Elsie supported the couple with her portraits of children and pets, photograph tinting, and painting restoration. Commissions included brochures and savings stamps for the National Recovery Act, illustrations for *Stamps and Cover Collecting* magazine, and over 30 pen-and-ink drawings of historic places for the State Conservation Commission of Virginia, probably done as a Works Progress Administration-sponsored project.

Perhaps influenced by her Yugoslavian herbalist grandmother, Elsie was enchanted with the wildflowers she saw on her travels. She decided to create a series of drawings for possible publication. Because the Sterlings walked from city to city, they couldn't carry Elsie's growing collection of life-sized wildflower portraits; each time they moved the artworks had to be shipped "will call" to the couple's next destination.

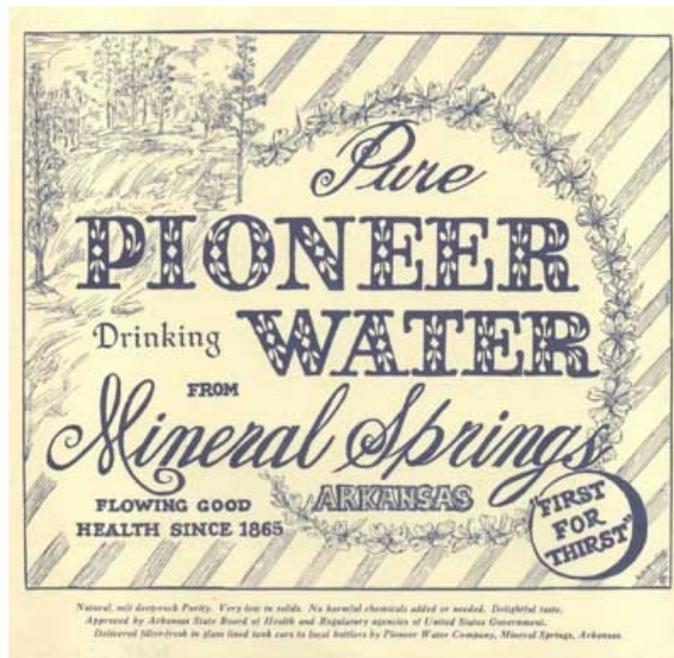
Richard started a business publishing city directories which was flourishing by the mid-1930s. Elsie's maiden sisters, Pauline and Lottie, were sent for to assist Richard in his work, leaving Elsie time for her art. A car was purchased and the family continued their travels throughout the South.

In 1942 the family was stranded in Rogers, Arkansas, a casualty of WWII gas and tire rationing. But they so liked the area and the abundance of wildflowers that they abandoned their transient lifestyle. For a time they rented Betty Blake's (Mrs. Will Rogers) old family home; later they bought a 100-year-old farmhouse at 219 West Willow. Flowers abounded inside and out, with Elsie's artwork filling the walls of the home and large gardens planted in the front- and backyards.



"Illustration of the Elkhorn Tavern, Battle of Pea Ridge, for the *Benton County Pioneer*, 1950s."

Pauline worked for an attorney while Lottie took on tax and accounting jobs and cared for the home. Elsie took every art job that came her way. Richard built art storage racks and devised a matting system to protect his wife's wildflower works. He also managed the family's finances and spent his time spinning tall tales on the porch. Neighbors found the family "odd" because of their simple dress, their frugal nature, and their desire to keep to themselves, but they enjoyed hearing Richard's flamboyant stories.

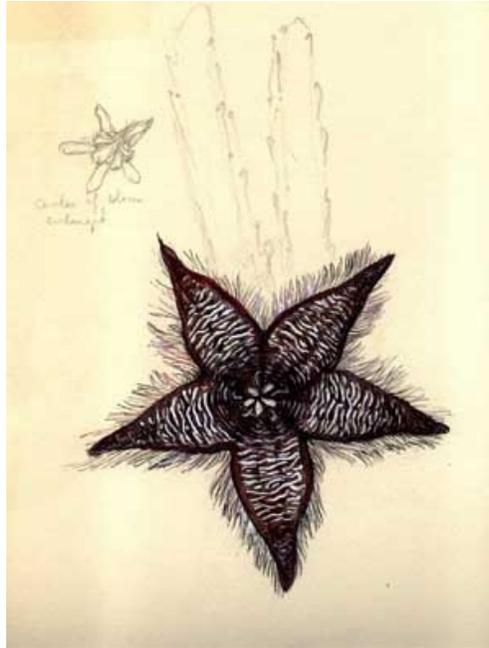


"Label for bottled water, probably 1950s."

Some of Elsie's commissions during this time were for window and truck signs, mail order catalogs, book illustrations, and advertisements, as well as photo retouching and tinting for local photographer Hubert Musteen. She produced portraits and landscapes for local art patrons such as Rogers lawyer Eli Leflar and did decorative work on furniture, costume jewelry, buttons, and dishes. Elsie produced historical illustrations for the *Benton County Pioneer*, a quarterly publication of the Benton County Historical Society. She also exhibited her work at the Clothesline Fair in Prairie Grove and the Ozarks Arts and Crafts Fair

(now known as the War Eagle Arts and Crafts Fair), two annual showcases for area artists and craftspeople.

On Sundays the family would drive into the country to assist Elsie with her wildflower series, believing her work would be of financial, as well as artistic, success. Sister Lottie once reminisced, "We believe it was her willingness to take on 'anything' that prepared her for the unsurpassed work in her wild flower collection. These were her special love, almost a relaxation from the jobs she was commissioned to do." Her hand-colored, life-size pen-and-ink drawings were meticulous, depicting each plant through most or all of its developmental stages. She found a mentor in Dr. Dwight M. Moore, a botany professor at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, who helped her with plant classification.



"Study of a carrion flower (*Stapelia gigantea*), probably 1950s."

Although flower paintings were popular during the 1940s, Elsie refused to sell individual portraits from the collection, preferring to leave it intact for future publication. For several years, both before and after her death, she or her family unsuccessfully approached various publishers about printing her work; an attempt to sell the portraits to Harvard University failed as well.

In her University of Oklahoma Master's thesis about Elsie Sterling, Ellen C. Stern suggested Elsie's use of cross hatching to indicate shading and her use of tiny notations to label plant parts may have contributed to her publication woes. The former was not in keeping with formal botanical illustration techniques while the latter would have made printing difficult, as the portraits would have to be reduced in size to fit a book format.



"Elsie Sterling with her artwork, probably 1940s."

In the 1950s Pauline became ill and the family apparently took trips to health spas in Canada and Mexico in search of a cure. Up to this point Elsie's output had been incredibly prolific, but there is not much evidence of work during this period. Later, when Elsie became ill, Richard refused to let her or Pauline see a doctor, preferring to treat them himself. In February 1960 Pauline died of cervical cancer. A month later, on March 25, Elsie died of stomach cancer; she was 52 years old. Before her death Elsie made Lottie promise to care for Richard, which she did until his death in 1966 at the age of 91.

Lottie moved to St. James, Missouri, in 1974 to join a religious commune under the leadership of Joseph Jeffers. A flamboyant evangelist claiming to be the son of Yahweh and the true Messiah, Jeffers believed in aliens and the "power of pyramids to sustain everlasting life." Because commune members were required to turn over their worldly goods, Elsie's drawings, sketches, paintings, and nearly 500 wildflower portraits became the property of the Kingdom of Yahweh. In 1974 they were appraised for over \$58,000.

Facing allegations that he conspired to murder his wife, Jeffers moved his commune to San Benito, Texas, in 1979. Three months later Elsie's collection was abandoned at the public library in nearby Harlingen, as Jeffers headed for Hawaii. The library donated the materials to the Pan-American University in Edinburg, Texas, which deemed that Arkansas was their proper home. The University donated the wildflower series to Arkansas Tech University in Russellville, which later sold the collection to The Arts and Science Center for Southeast Arkansas in Pine Bluff.

The remainder of Elsie Mistie Sterling's drawings, some 300 artworks in all, was donated to the Rogers Historical Museum in 1984. This collection includes pieces from every phase of Elsie's career, from her school days to her journeyman-artist period and from her *Pioneer* sketches to her commercial work. There are even a few drawings by Lottie, Pauline, and Richard who must have found it difficult to resist the creative urge. In recent years the Museum has been fortunate to receive several of Elsie's pen-and-

ink drawings, pastels, and paintings that had remained in the Rogers community, including several of the works done for Eli Leflar.

CREDITS

"Rogers Woman Possesses Huge Collection of Water Color Botanical Studies," *Joplin Globe* (4-10-1949); "Dr. & Mrs. R.A. Sterling Exhibiting at Fair" by Lottie Mistie (pre-1960); Elsie Sterling, introduction to a projected book about Ozark wildflowers (pre-1960); Wilma Cole, "Flower 'Portraits' Are Features at Fair," *Arkansas Gazette* (8-28-1966); Lottie Mistie, "Miscellaneous Recollections" (post-1974); an undated and uncredited biography on Elsie Sterling (probably authored by the Southeast Arkansas Arts & Science Center, 1980s); and Ellen C. Stern, M.L.S. thesis, University of Oklahoma, *Elsie Mistie Sterling (1907-1960): Arkansas Artist / Botanical Illustrator* (1990).