

Syracuse Univers

CATALOGUE OF THE EXHIBITION

MARY PETTY
Cover Illustrations for *The New Yorker*

1. The Tennis Match, 1941
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.700
2. Mrs. Peabody Sweeping The Front Stairs Of Her Brownstone, 1944
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.701
3. The Thanksgiving Dinner, 1944
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.702
4. At The Seashore, (young lady with dachshund and seashell), 1945
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.703
5. Fay Polishing Silver, 1945
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.704
6. Fay Whistling For A Taxi, 1948
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.705
7. Peabody Family Portrait, 1948
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.706
8. Gala Affair At The Peabody Mansion, 1948
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.707
9. Tea Time In The Gazebo, 1949
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.708
10. Fay Welcoming In The New Year, 1949
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.709
11. Watching "Wälkure" On Television, 1950
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.710
12. Fay The Archer, 1950
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.711
13. Fay Serving a "Stir-Up" Cup To Hunting Party, 1950
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.712
14. Fay Trying On An Ermine Outfit, 1953
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.713
15. Fay And Chauffeur Waiting On The Peabody's Automobile, 1953
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.714
16. Unpacking Sea Shells, 1953
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.715
17. Fay "Skinny-Dipping" In A Forest Pond, 1954
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.716
18. Choosing Jewels From The Safe, 1954
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.717
19. Mrs. Peabody Watching A Neighbor's Party, 1955
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.718
20. Fay Changing A Bulb In A Crystal Chandelier, 1955
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.19
21. Fay Plugging In An Electric Blanket For Mrs. Peabody, 1956
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.720
22. Fay Serving Milk To A Riding Party Of Youngsters, 1956
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.721
23. Fay Wrestling With A Riding Boot, 1958
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.722
24. Mrs. Peabody And Fay In The Wine Cellar, 1950
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.723
25. Fay Calling The Absent Huntress, 1960
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.724
26. Mrs. Peabody Playing The Piano, 1961
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.725
27. Mrs. Peabody And The Broken Bell Pull: The End Of An Era, 1966
watercolor and ink on paper SU79.726

The works in this exhibition are untitled, however descriptive titles have been assigned by the Syracuse University Art Collections

Syracuse University Art Galleries

FOREWORD

Syracuse University is fortunate to have the collection of drawings of the New Yorker cartoonists, Mary Petty and her husband, Alan Dunn. The Mary Petty collection includes 27 covers for the New Yorker published between 1941 and 1966, two unpublished covers, 41 illustrations for Dickens' Martin Chuzzlewit and many other drawings, some of which were published in the New Yorker magazine between 1927 and 1966. The Alan Dunn collection includes the bulk of his works and papers, both published and unpublished.

The Mary Petty-Dunn bequest has permitted the establishment of a Center for Social Cartooning at Syracuse University. Through the bequest, all the Petty-Dunn drawings, letters, papers and memorabilia will be organized and available to scholars in the field of social cartooning.

The bequest also permits the opportunity for Syracuse University to collect works by other renowned social cartoonists.

This is the first in a series of exhibitions on social cartooning which will be held at Syracuse University Lubin House Gallery, the Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery on the Syracuse University campus and other museums throughout the country.

This exhibition was prepared with the special assistance of the members of the staff of the Syracuse University Art Collections and the Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery. Our gratitude is extended to Mrs. Elizabeth Melczer, Graduate Research Assistant and Mr. Domenic J. Iacono, Registrar of the Art Collections and Art Gallery; for the research and organization of the exhibition.

Appreciation is extended to Dr. David Tatham, Professor of Fine Arts, Syracuse University and Mr. Jason Wong, Curator of the Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery, for making the catalogue revisions.

A special thank you is also due to Ms. Marjorie Tepper, Graduate Research Assistant, Mr. William Boylan and Mr. Leonard Eichler, Technicians; Ms. Paula Edelsack, Office Coordinator; Mr. David Howe and Mr. Thomas Piche, Graduate Assistants for their help in organizing and staging this exhibition. We are also grateful for the assistance, cooperation and encouragement given by Mr. David Prager, Attorney for the Mary Petty Estate.

Alfred T. Collette, Director
Syracuse University Art Collections

Joseph A. Scala, Director
Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery
Lubin House Art Gallery

MARY PETTY

(April 29, 1899 - March 6, 1976)

Mary Petty's *New Yorker* magazine covers give one the distinct feeling of looking at a by-gone world. Actually, that world was already in retreat when her first cartoon appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1927, and it kept retreating, occasionally gasping for some fresh air, during the almost forty years Mary Petty was a regular contributor to the *New Yorker* magazine.

Mary Petty was born on April 29, 1899 in Hampton, New Jersey into an intellectually-oriented family; her father was a professor of law. She attended the Horace Mann private school in New York City from which she graduated in 1922. In December 1927, she married Alan Dunn, a *New Yorker* cartoonist and writer. The two, often working as a team, took the world apart and recomposed it through a kaleidoscopic touch of humor, wit and art.

It was a New York world that was being taken apart; a world that Mary and Alan knew all too well. A three-bedroom apartment in the heart of Manhattan served as their home and studio for more than thirty years. Modest and unpretentious, the apartment became a laboratory where the outside world was sifted and refracted through the crystals of their imagination. Bent over a small drawing board in her bedroom and working with the slowness of a snail (as Mary herself testifies to it in her letters), it was there that she imagined, conceived and drew hundreds of cartoons, 233 of which were published in the *New Yorker*. It was there as well that she painted the 38 watercolors which appeared as *New Yorker* covers, 27 of which have been included in the current exhibition.

Her ideas germinated from the many-sided and stratified social world of the New York City upper class, from their brownstone houses, their fancy dinner tables, their summer retreats along the Hudson and their hunting parties. Mary and Alan led a busy social life that put them in contact with a wealth of characters and situations which gave, particularly to Mary, the needed insights into the happy incongruities of upper class life. She delicately and wittily portrayed this class. Her satire was gentle but deeply rooted in human character. She was a remarkably acute observer.

While strolling to Schraffts or to the Cosmopolitan Club in the afternoon, or promenading at parties with her large floppy hat, or listening to the gossips of the city during late dinner parties, Mary Petty absorbed all the imponderable bits of life out of which she created her settings and characters.

From these experiences sprang her lavish late-Victorian interiors with their Aubusson rugs, crystal chandeliers, egg and dart moldings, and rococo ceilings, and her dreamy garden scenes with their iron grillework and wicker chairs. Against such backdrops, her genre scenes were enacted: the Thanksgiving dinner; the silver polishing in the butler's pantry; the sitting for a family portrait; the embroidering in a gazebo with fluted columns and Ionic capitals. Mary Petty affectionately portrayed the guardians of an *ancien regime* who fortified themselves against boredom with drinking, who had water poured into their limousine radiators from chaffed silver pitchers, who danced elegantly to the tunes of a private orchestra and who fell asleep while watching "Wälkure" on the television set.

And so Mary Petty created Mrs. Peabody, the dowager; icy, selfish, domineering but likable character of rigid composure, pompadour coiffure and oversized pearls, who took of the waters at Saratoga, sipped medicinal sherry, kept a sharp eye over her household and, tucked into bed under an electric blanket, read Mme. de Sevigné's letters. It was she who, in rare moments of rapture, played a frolicsome waltz on her Collard piano to which a faint echo responded in the distant salon.

That faint echo pertained to a strangely wistful, airy creature in starched uniform of whom Mary Petty herself wrote: "I have named her Fay as that name seemed the one that most nearly expressed her quality, something rather gossamer and fragile, easily crushed and blown about by the harsh winds of life, yet very occasionally experiencing the unexpected touch of a benevolent zephyr which wafts her up to small heights of timid happiness." In those moments of innocent happiness Fay shot an arrow right on target, tried on her mistress' ermine opera cape, and, standing on a high ladder, wondered about the angels in paradise.

Fay is a central character against whom that world of stiff patricians and domineering matrons was measured. And in that seemingly uneven competition, she is not found wanting. There was a special adroitness about her. She never spilled a drop while serving a stir-up cup to the hunting party. Her daring spirit contrasted with those complacent men and women who seemed confident in their belief that whatever was wrong with them should be wrong with everybody else. As Mary herself said of Fay, she had snap.

In Mary Petty's artistic idiom the meticulous details were as necessary a handmaiden to the governing idea as Fay was to Mrs. Peabody. The society she depicted is built upon the thousand flimsy details and elegant eccentricities of a carefully structured life of privilege. It was the ordinariness of the life of the wealthy that Mary Petty chided in her work. In her drawings, her cartoons and her *New Yorker* covers, she earned a significant place in the history of graphic satire. The quality of playfulness was as distinctive as her attenuated figures. Her art added new shading to the timeless dictum *castigat ridendo mores.*

Mary Petty's first cartoon appeared in the *New Yorker* on May 22, 1927 and her last one on March 19, 1966 in the same journal.

Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, and is part of the permanent collection in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Museum of the City of New York and the Wichita Art Museum in Wichita, Kansas. The largest single collection of her work is owned by the Syracuse University Art Collections, a gift from the artist.

Mary Petty illustrated the following books:

Dickens, Charles. *Martin Chuzzlewit.* Knopf, 1947
Mosher, John. *Celibate at Twilight.* Random House, 1940.
Petty, Mary. *This Petty Pace.* Knopf, 1945.
Robsjohn-Gibbings, T.H. *Good-bye, Mr. Chippendale.* Knopf, 1944.
_____. *Homes of the Brave.* Knopf, 1954.

Mrs. Elisabeth Melczer
Graduate Research Assistant
Syracuse University Art Collections

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CREDITS

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