

Sept 13/09

COLUMNISTS

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# Putting the art in Arkansas

I have had the pleasure of meeting many amazing Arkansans during my 60-year life. Two of the most remarkable were Elsie and Louis Freund, stalwart artists whose lives were devoted to art, to Eureka Springs where they lived, and to each other. I was reminded recently that Louis has been dead for a decade—and it has been eight years since Elsie's beautiful and whimsical being was stolen away by death. They must not be forgotten.

Harry Louis Freund (pronounced "friend") was born in 1905 in Clinton, Missouri. He was educated at the University of Missouri and Washington University in St. Louis. A fellowship allowed Louis to study in Paris in 1929. Upon returning to the United States just as the Great Depression was settling in, Louis was lucky to find work with the fine arts section of the Works Progress Administration. His strong and expressive style earned him commissions to paint murals in public buildings in Pocahontas, Heber Springs, Rogers, and Eureka Springs—as well as in six other states and the District of Columbia.

In 1938 Hendrix College named Louis as artist-in-residence—an association that would continue through World War II. With a steady income, he married Elsie Bates, an artist and craftswoman in her own right.

Elsie Mari Bates was born in 1912, in Taney County, Missouri, where her father was the superintendent of a game preserve. At the age of five, Elsie announced her intention to become an artist, an ambition encouraged by the family owning the game preserve. She boarded in Girard, Kansas, in order to attend high school, but graduated in 1929 from high school in Branson, Mo., where her family had relocated.

Elsie studied for one year at the Kansas City Art Institute, but the harsh economic times forced her to return home to Branson. Opening a gift shop, Elsie sold local crafts—including items of her own making. This was the modest beginning of Elsie's lifelong pursuit and celebration of art.

Louis and Elsie met in the summer of 1936, when Louis was touring the Ozarks in a Model T Ford capturing scenes from a culture that was rapidly changing. He was a dashing fellow, given to wearing berets, and sporting a jaunty moustache. They courted for three years, while

## Tom Dillard



Louis saved money. He purchased Hatchet Hall, a large boarding house in Eureka Springs that had once been the home of the famous temperance advocate Carry Nation, saving it from demolition. In July 1939, Louis and Elsie married and moved into the old structure. They immediately began a summer art school, which operated until 1951.

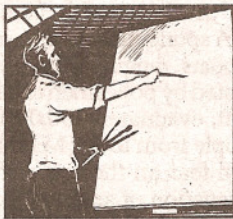
World War II was a difficult time for Louis. A pacifist his entire life, Louis was drafted in 1943. As a conscientious objector, Louis painted murals for Camp Robinson in North Little Rock and Camp Chaffee near Fort Smith.

Following the war, Louis worked for a time as a traveling portrait painter. In 1949 he began teaching art at Stetson University in De Land, Florida. The Freunds spent their summers traveling and at Hatchet Hall.

Upon retiring from Stetson in 1967, Elsie and Louis settled permanently in Eureka Springs. They threw themselves into local arts activities—while Louis also took on historic preservation efforts.

Elsie and Louis moved to retirement quarters in Little Rock in 1995. Louis died in December 1999 and Elsie lived until June 2001. They are both buried in their beloved Eureka Springs.

I predict Elsie's work—especially her line of "Elsa" jewelry and, surprisingly, her textile art—will come to outshine Louis' paintings. This is not to disparage his work, which I do indeed like, especially the murals. But Elsie's watercolors are both ethereal and yet structured; her textiles are used in surprising ways—such as in a mobile. But, it is her jewelry that has earned Elsie a place in art and craft history. A curator at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York wrote that Elsie's work "gives voice to the creative process itself in her perception of possibilities, and relentless pursuit of quality in design and execution."



Tom Dillard is head of the special collections department at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. Email him at [tdillar@uark.edu](mailto:tdillar@uark.edu).