

Natural Selection: The Story of an Evangelist, a Babysitter, and the Family they Loved

SPEAKERS

Jonathan Singer, Helen Stern



Jonathan Singer 00:05

This is the Portland Art Museum Podcast, a channel between the Museum and you. Our goal is to amplify community voices through conversations and personal stories. And we're here to facilitate respectful dialogue, debate, and the free exchange of ideas. To participate, submit your ideas at pam.to/podcastidea. We invite you to connect with art through your own experience, voice, and personal journey. Relevant links and transcripts for each episode are available at portlandartmuseum.org/podcast. My name is Jonathan Singer. I'm a Portland native. And I like to associate myself with organizations and causes I'm passionate about such as the Oregon Bus Project and the Oregon Jewish Community Foundation among many others. I think that's something that's been passed down to me by my family, especially my grandparents, Helen and Jerome Stern. After Jerry retired from the successful plumbing supply company he founded, he and Helen became champions for Jewish refugees fleeing the USSR in the 1990s. They also used their good fortune to help benefit Reed College, Portland Center Stage, and the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization or IRCO, if you listened to the Portland Art Museum's limited podcast series, Reflections on Common Ground, IRCO might sound familiar to you. On this episode of the Portland Art Museum Podcast, I'm going to have a chat with my grandmother Helen Stern about a particular artwork that she has on display at the Portland Art Museum. William Adolphe Bouguereau's "Nature's Fan - Girl with Child." If you've been in the European galleries in the last few years, you've seen it on the walls. It's quite large and very striking. Showcasing Bouguereau's capacity for expressing tone. It depicts a young woman tickling a small child delicately with a tree branch in the clearing

of a wooded area. I encourage you to view it by clicking on the related link in this episode's description. And now, here is a conversation between me and my grandmother Helen Stern. Well, it's good to see you. I'm going to try not to call you Baba, even though that's how you're known in our family. I'll try to call you, Helen for the purpose of this podcast. So you were born in Portland and grew up in Oregon. And you've been in Portland for? Well, quite a long time since you and my grandfather Jerry were married in the 1940s. How have you been involved in the community? What what sort of activities and causes and art and different causes have been important to you?



Helen Stern 03:11

Well, I I support the Portland Art Museum.



Jonathan Singer 03:15

Let's talk a little bit about the Bouguereau painting, "Nature's Fan" and how you and Jerry, who were active members of Portland's Jewish community, came to receive the painting from one of America's leading evangelists and faith healers whose name was Kathryn Kuhlman. So I found a passage in her biography that says that in 1974, Kathryn revised her will. In it, she bequeathed to Jerome and Helen Stern of Portland, Oregon, a valuable painting, "In appreciation for the kindness, evidence by Mr. And Mrs. Stern to my sister Myrtle Parrot, at a time when she desperately needed such kindness." Who was Myrtle Parrot? And how did you get to know her?



Helen Stern 04:06

Well, that's the beginning of the story. I desperately needed a babysitter. So I looked in the little neighborhood sheet and here with someone very close to where I lived saying she would like a job as a babysitter. So I went over and interviewed her. And here was this very queenly woman wearing a Queen Anne type of hat, little fur ocelot. And that was Mrs. Parrot. And I found out later that her husband has just left her. He was a minister as she was. And that's what Kathryn mentioned. We appeared in her life when she was at a low point. Because once I started using her as a babysitter, she became a member of the family.



Jonathan Singer 05:01

What was Myrtle Parrot like?



Helen Stern 05:04

She was very regal, just very. She was how can I say it?



Jonathan Singer 05:15

Did she How often did was she did she come to the house?



Helen Stern 05:19

Oh, I had I engaged her for very every Wednesday afternoon and Saturday night. The as I said, when she was babysitting with the kids, when I went to the hospital to have Evie the baby. and Mrs. Parrot was on her knees the whole time, praying for me. And after Eve came she, she really was instrumental in raising her. They would go on long walks and she'd say, "look at the bumblebee sitting on the yellow Daisy" and pointing things out her - very genteel, lovely lady.



Jonathan Singer 06:04

So as I've heard the story and we touched on it a little bit, but Myrtle Parrot, I think was the older sister of Kathryn Kuhlman.



Helen Stern 06:13

Right.



Jonathan Singer 06:14

And she had been married to, you know, a revivalist. And they sort of brought Kathryn Kuhlman into evangelizing is that



Helen Stern 06:26

that's a good description.



Jonathan Singer 06:28

But then, you know, sometime it sounds like shortly, I guess, before you met her, her husband left her for a younger woman.

H Helen Stern 06:39
Another minister, probably.

J Jonathan Singer 06:41
And it was she felt scandalized.

H Helen Stern 06:43
Uh huh.

J Jonathan Singer 06:44
But was it was it

H Helen Stern 06:45
but she didn't tell us that for years. And we had a very close relative die. And Jerry was so bereft and Mrs. Parrot wanted to come for him. And she said, Mr. Stern, she never called us Jerry, or Helen- Mr. Stern there are worse things in life than death. And that was when we learned about this horrible thing that had happened to her, her husband had created a scandal and humiliated her and ran away with another woman.

J Jonathan Singer 07:26
Wow. So did she. Did she take care of other kids or

H Helen Stern 07:30
no, no, she was just mine. I don't think - she certainly wasn't working for the money. We started out paying 35 cents an hour. And then we raised it to 50 cents an hour. But I just think it was something she wanted to do. And she fell in love with our family.

J Jonathan Singer 07:50
And you fell in love her

H Helen Stern 07:51

We fell in love with her.

J Jonathan Singer 07:53
That's so nice.

H Helen Stern 07:55
My kids loved her. We loved her. So anyway, after she had been a working with my family for a couple years. She says I'd like to have you meet my sister, who's coming to Portland. Well, okay, we didn't know who her sister was. But as I said, we were like family. So when Kathryn came to town, we got together. And what a delightful person she was. She was like, Auntie Mame. very outgoing, wonderful sense of humor. Big boisterous laughter. So one of the reasons she fell in love with our family is because she and Jerry would get into very long discussions on religion. And she would tell Jerry, where we were wrong. And Jerry would tell her where she was wrong. And their conversations became very animated. They grew to really love each other.

J Jonathan Singer 08:58
So even though they had this different religious view, they they found that they had a shared faith.

H Helen Stern 09:05
That's right. It brought them closer.

J Jonathan Singer 09:08
So when you met Mrs. Parrot, my mom who's your oldest child, and Tom, the middle child, and maybe Eve was born?

H Helen Stern 09:18
Not yet

J Jonathan Singer 09:18
not even born. So this sort of been like the early 1950s.

H Helen Stern 09:22
Right.

J Jonathan Singer 09:23
So you were living in West Slope in a small house that Jerry had built a little bit after the war. And then you come to meet this very worldly woman who, who filled arenas of 10s of thousands of people and would be on television and radio, doing faith and faith healing. It was a little bit of a different world that she was in.

H Helen Stern 09:49
It was an eye opener. She was not well known on the West Coast when we first met her, because she used to do her preaching in Iowa. And,

J Jonathan Singer 09:59
and eventually she was in Pittsburgh.

H Helen Stern 10:01
Yes. Well, that's, that's where her home was.

J Jonathan Singer 10:04
Yeah. So did you ever find it strange that the, you know, people of such different backgrounds, as you and Jerry and Kathryn became so close?

H Helen Stern 10:15
I didn't find it strange. I noted it. But my husband attracted people. Everybody loved him. And to me, this was just another person who loved Jerry, and through Jerry loved me.

J Jonathan Singer 10:34
Did you ever go to any of her services?

H Helen Stern 10:36

Oh my Yes, that was the eye opener. And the thing that really, that's when I got confused. Because I don't know if you know what a faith healer does. She brings these people in, some are allowed to come on the stage where she is. And she would pray over this person who couldn't walk and tap him on the shoulder without the person would pass out flat on the stage. And then when you get up, he's run across the stage. He was cured.

J Jonathan Singer 11:14
Wow.

H Helen Stern 11:15
And Jerry was enchanted by it. I was disillusioned, because what about all these other hundreds of people that were sitting in the audience who didn't get cured, but of course that's away from Bouguereau, isn't it?

J Jonathan Singer 11:31
And so you would sometimes later you would go, either, I think some time you went to see her in Los Angeles

H Helen Stern 11:38
we did

J Jonathan Singer 11:40
and you would visit her in Pittsburgh.

H Helen Stern 11:42
And it was in Pittsburgh, that we became enamored with Bouguereau. She invited us to stay in her condominium. I understand. There's an area in Pittsburgh that's called The Y. Which is most choice neighborhood and her in this gorgeous condominium in the bedroom, where we stayed was this gorgeous painting. Jerry was completely enchanted with it. You know, when we were ready to go, and he told Kathryn, how much he loved her collection, but especially the Bougeureau, he loved it. And she says to Jerry, you really like it, huh? And oh, yeah. And that was the end of that part.

J Jonathan Singer 12:30
So did but you that that conversation stuck with you?

H Helen Stern 12:35
Yes.

J Jonathan Singer 12:36
And that's maybe, you know, 50 years ago in the mid 1960s, or something that this happened? And what what do you think attracted Jerry, to the painting or to you to the painting for that matter?

H Helen Stern 12:50
For one thing that's so well done? lifelike, but Kathryn said that it was painted for a Jewish man. And I don't know why she felt that because a Jewish man ordered it that Jerry would love it. But he did. I don't know what the connection was. But it's a very beautiful thing.

J Jonathan Singer 13:14
So what did you or Jerry visit her in the time after that

H Helen Stern 13:19
many times to visit her in Palm Springs, California. And every time she took a trip, she would send gifts to Evie our youngest child, because Evie was born after Mrs. Parrot started coming to us. And Evie was Mrs. Parrot's baby. And therefore Kathryn's baby. So she traveled all over the world preaching and sent lovely gifts to Evie.

J Jonathan Singer 13:52
And how long was Mrs. Parrot part of the family?

H Helen Stern 13:56
I would say 15 or 20 years.

- J** Jonathan Singer 14:00
At some point, you know, Kathryn makes this will I guess in January 1974. Did you find out already then? Or did she tell you that she was going to leave this painting that maybe a decade earlier Jerry had marveled at or did you find out after the fact?
- H** Helen Stern 14:21
Yeah. But she didn't come out and say I'm leaving this to you. But she hinted that we might get it some time. And so do you want me to go into the will?
- J** Jonathan Singer 14:32
Yeah, please.
- H** Helen Stern 14:33
So when she did pass away, we were shocked that the will had been tampered with.
- J** Jonathan Singer 14:42
Someone changed the will or she changed the will?
- H** Helen Stern 14:45
Well, that's true. You ever know
- J** Jonathan Singer 14:46
two years later to leave almost all of it to an auto dealer in Oklahoma?
- H** Helen Stern 14:52
Yes. And we felt it was dishonest because we know how much she loved her staff. They were her family. And he kept them out of it, too. Nobody got anything except Jerry and Helen Stern.
- J** Jonathan Singer 15:08
So this painting what happens that cut basically comes in the mail to your house you're

living

H Helen Stern 15:15
many years after the will was contested. It took several years we had given up ever get-receiving it in the first place. We're not used to having people just give us things. And we really didn't believe we were ever going to get it. And then one day it did arrive.

J Jonathan Singer 15:36
So what did it mean to the two of you when this painting came to your home?

H Helen Stern 15:41
sadness that she was gone? And nobody remembered her by then.

J Jonathan Singer 15:48
But was there also, was it a little bittersweet? Was there some sweet in there that she had remembered you?

H Helen Stern 15:55
Well, we did that part. We felt at the beginning when when we heard that we were in the will. The bittersweet part was we got it. from them grudgingly I guess I didn't know it was not the way she would have liked it to be presented to us.

J Jonathan Singer 16:16
Interesting. But you proudly displayed it in your house, it was part of your collection.

H Helen Stern 16:22
Oh, yeah.

J Jonathan Singer 16:23
You know, how did you get into art collecting? And what does what does art and what the art and paintings in your home mean to you?

- H** Helen Stern 16:32
If I analyze it and thought about a lot, I would probably say the Bouguereau was the one that led us into the art world. We studied everything we could about him. We followed exhibits, you know, plays places where his works, were exhibited. And
- J** Jonathan Singer 16:54
Jerry was doing very well by then we were able to afford to buy art. And that's probably how we started. How did you and how do you choose art? Do you have a theory of things that you like? Or is it just things that sing to you? Did you work with particular galleries in Portland?
- H** Helen Stern 17:17
Good questions, Jonathan. The thing we picked out things that we liked, I would say, we lean towards romantic realism in the way of art. We're not so much into the avant garde or way out type of paintings, just realistic.
- J** Jonathan Singer 17:38
And what other artists do you have in your collection?
- H** Helen Stern 17:42
I have a lot of glass. I've got Dale Chihuly and Lino...We can't pronounce his last name. I don't have multiple pieces by probably. I have more Pacific Northwest Artists than any other.
- J** Jonathan Singer 18:03
Yeah. Do you have a painting from Michele Russo, also.
- H** Helen Stern 18:07
this is Gregory Grenon. We like Sherrie Wolf, too
- J** Jonathan Singer 18:13
what does it mean to you to have art in your home

H Helen Stern 18:15
collecting art for us was an activity to go to the galleries is and look at painting listen and learn what we liked. And to bring able to bring it home and covet it and keep it was overwhelming but very gratifying. And there's no end to collecting art. You're never done.

J Jonathan Singer 18:43
Did you particularly enjoyed, you know, Northwest art not just to support the community, but maybe because you got to meet some of the artists.

H Helen Stern 18:52
Yes. That's a good point. It's very gratifying to meet the artists and see her work from the beginning. The first original painting we ever got. Well, well one of the first was a panel with blue and white China teacups that Sherrie Wolf had painted I didn't even know it was hers when I bought it. And we collected quite a few of her things, it was fun to go to her studio and watch her create. Yeah. And then we used to go to Laura Russo's gallery quite a bit. We bought quite a few things from her.

J Jonathan Singer 19:37
So a couple weeks ago, you and I had dinner at the Hoxton hotel, right next to the Chinatown gate. And we were getting into the elevator. And what was the first thing that you noticed?

H Helen Stern 19:51
A painting of blue and white China teacups that Sherrie Wolf had produced years ago. Probably one of her first sellable items.

J Jonathan Singer 20:04
I think that I had walked into the elevator before and just enjoyed that they had artwork up, but you noticed it, The second we walked in there. And I want to say is there a painting that she did that plays on the Bouguereau? Am I am I remembering that right? Is it? Is it even here? Yes, it is. Tell me about how you came to put the painting the Bouguereau painting on loan at the Portland Art Museum at the beginning.

H

Helen Stern 20:35

By then we were living on Rivington Street in a big house. But Jerry had retired. And we had plan to spend half the year in Palm Springs, and half the year in Portland, we thought with it, we thought we could do it. And if we tried it a couple of years, we learned that the house always punished us. When we left it alone for six months, I felt that it wasn't safe there. I was I felt it would deteriorate there the temperature varied. So. And I think when we finally made the decision to give it up, it was because we really wanted everybody to see this beautiful painting. Our family and our many friends were thrilled with it. But I felt it deserved to be in a public place where it would be cared for properly. And many, many people could enjoy it.

J

Jonathan Singer 21:41

And then eventually, you've put it on a much more, you know, long term placement with the Museum. So it's not just seasonally at the Art Museum, it's there long term, right?

H

Helen Stern 21:55

Well, we made the promise if we loaned it to it, to them now to ever put it in the archives that it had to be shown. And they were very, very cooperative.

J

Jonathan Singer 22:08

So what it what does it mean to you, for the painting to be up there today for you to go see it, and see how people react to it?

H

Helen Stern 22:17

I go often. And I'm I never fail to feel a little emotional, very proud of it. And I think it's getting lovelier with age, I love to see people standing around admiring and the Art Museum had done a good job of displaying it, it's in a prominent place.

J

Jonathan Singer 22:41

What does it mean to you also, to think of generations to come seeing this painting and enjoying it, and maybe a part of it being the time that you were a shepherd of it that wasn't necessarily something just that you owned. But it was something that you you wanted to protect and was meaningful to you?

H Helen Stern 23:06
How do you feel about your children? And that's the way I felt about this painting. Every time I go there. I'm really proud of it. I didn't paint it. But I'm proud that it - It's ours that it has been ours.

J Jonathan Singer 23:23
Yeah. How does it make you feel that your name is next to the painting, especially given that this painting was a big part of what brought you into the Northwest art community and got you involved in art?

H Helen Stern 23:41
I just feel very proud.

J Jonathan Singer 23:44
I think that's right. And it's, you know that it's not just hidden away somewhere. It seems like it's an it's important to you. And it has been important to you that to share it with the community.

H Helen Stern 23:55
That's right.

J Jonathan Singer 23:56
You're still even today involved in the art community. Maybe you're doing less collecting. But what are you and I doing tomorrow night?

H Helen Stern 24:05
Well, I'm involved in the Portland Center Stage. And tomorrow is the opening of In the Heights. And so Jonathan and I and other members of our family are going to the opening dinner beforehand. And to the show. I've been supporting that theater

J Jonathan Singer 24:26
since even before it was called Portland center stage.

H Helen Stern 24:29
Yeah.

J Jonathan Singer 24:30
And what do you get out of art? You're involved in lots of things and, and you and Jerry were very philanthropic, helping bring hundreds of refugees to America and to Israel to resettle people. You've been involved in efforts to fight cancer. So you've had a lot of things that you've supported a lot of charitable causes. And that's something that's a wonderful legacy to me, and I know to the rest of the family, but what's meaningful to you about the arts?

H Helen Stern 25:06
Well, I like what the art community is doing in the way of educating schoolchildren, arts opens up the world. And you can see through a screen through a haze, and all these wonderful things out there.

J Jonathan Singer 25:24
We're living in difficult times. And it's nice for people to have things that that make them think and that are beautiful and things like that.

H Helen Stern 25:35
And everybody can be an artist. You don't have to be wealthy, or famous. It's satisfying to create something. Art collecting is another form of education. You look, you observe, you study, you read about it. It makes you aware. It makes you aware of the beauty in this world.

J Jonathan Singer 26:01
Thank you for listening to the Portland Art Museum Podcast. For more information about what's on view at the Portland Art Museum, visit portlandartmuseum.org. I'd like to thank my grandmother, Helen Stern, my late grandfather, Jerry Stern, and the whole family for instilling in me an appreciation of art and a dedication to philanthropy and service to the community. And lastly, I'd also like to thank you, the listener.