



MARY P. CORBETT (1930–2019)

A recently discovered self-taught artist, Mary Paulina Corbett created a novel and highly personal body of work that reflects the thoughts, interests, and preoccupations of a young woman coming of age in small-town America during the 1940s. Replete with a cast of characters ranging from fictionalized female protagonists and family pets to heroic male figures drawn from popular culture, Corbett's idiosyncratic and hyper-feminine drawings were created between 1942 and 1951—formative years during which she transitioned from a teenager to an adult. While creating her brief but very private narrative, Corbett also developed as an artist, moving from a lyrical and loosely rendered comic-book style to a more refined and equally dynamic handling of the figure.

Born in Upland, Pennsylvania, on June 17, 1930, Corbett was the only daughter of Alexander G. Corbett (1908–2000) and his wife, Elida Gertrude “Lida” Linton (1905–1997). In the wake of her parents' divorce in 1932, she and her mother moved in with her grandparents, William B. and Mary Z. Linton, and her older sister, Ruth, in Bethel, Delaware County, Pennsylvania. An administrative employee at the Sun Oil Company in Marcus Hook, Pennsylvania, prior to his retirement, William later served on the Bethel Township School Board.

Corbett completed her middle school education at Bethel Township's public school in 1944. Three years later, she earned her high school diploma from American School, an alternative home-study educational institution based in Chicago that offered a rigorous yet innovative curriculum that allowed students to work at their own pace. (Chartered in 1897, the school continues to operate today.) In addition to traditional classes, Corbett would have had access to courses such as "Art Drawing Landscapes," "Art Drawing Animals," and "Art Drawing People," which were part of the school's curriculum during the time she was enrolled. (Email from Kathy Peters, American School, Chicago, Illinois, to Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York, September 28, 2022, Hirschl & Adler Galleries archives).

Corbett's earliest drawings date from February 27, 1942. Working with colored pencil, watercolor, and ink on letter-size scrap or writing paper (sometimes double-sided), she began creating exuberant vignettes of daily life featuring long-legged teenage girls—often conceived as friends or rivals—portrayed in soda shops, stores, bedrooms, or outdoor leisure settings where they interact with goofy human-animal hybrids that were inspired by her family's cats, dogs, and horses. (Corbett's photo albums [estate of the artist] include numerous images of the family pets.) Works from this period include *Untitled* ("Eddy, Ackie, and Marie are in Tillie's store ... Dec. 29, 1944 Fri. afternoon") (Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York). On one side of the sheet, "Eddy" appears in the form of a gleeful male cat wearing a turtle-neck sweater donned with the letter "A," his fingers wrapped around the shoulder of one of the two boy-crazed admirers at his side. On the verso of the sheet, Corbett depicted the Lone Ranger (a recurrent motif in her iconography) astride his white stallion, Silver, their movements observed by a young woman wearing a green jacket and a colorful headscarf—possibly an allusion to Corbett herself. The animated poses of the figures, the wacky explanatory dialogue, the vibrant hues, and Corbett's rapid shorthand style, with its spirited linearity, are typical of her early technique and point

to the influence of sources such as mid-century comic strips and comic books, which were read by boys and girls alike. Growing up during the Golden Age of American comics, Corbett would also have been aware—aside from the male superheroes who monopolized the genre—of the comics dominated by female leads, among them elementary-aged characters such as Little Lulu and Nancy, as well as the young working women that graced the pages of *Winnie Winkle the Breadwinner* and *Somebody's Stenog*.

Corbett's aesthetic approach and subject matter were also informed by the contemporary news clippings, magazine articles, and movie advertisements she pasted into her scrapbooks. (Corbett's scrapbooks are now in a private collection.) To be sure, her memorabilia from these years attests to her youthful infatuation with the movie heroes of her day: not only the Lone Ranger and his sidekick, Tonto, but a bevy of leading men from Hollywood movies that included Lloyd Bridges (Corbett was a member of his fan club), Richard Denning, James Mason, and Buster Crabbe, in addition to pin-up girls and screen idols such as Carole Lombard. Corbett's archive also includes a photograph, which she probably took herself, of Bill Haley, the "father of rock and roll" whose family settled in Bethel when he was seven years old.

By the late 1940s—perhaps through courses taken at American School—Corbett had developed a more realistic illustration-like style in which she combined with a dark, reductive palette that was no doubt indebted to noir cinema as exemplified in brooding B-westerns, among them *Ramrod* (1947), and gangster films such as *The Street with No Name* (1948). Sources such as detective novels and pulp magazines could also have informed her later work. Not surprisingly, as Corbett's artistic expertise became more advanced, her iconography matured as well. While her early drawings exude a comic quality and a playful aura of sexual innocence, Corbett's work from this period—dominated by sensuous

women with hourglass waists sometimes paired with serious or dangerous-looking men—has an edginess that coincides with her passage into adulthood. Her remarkable progression as an artist and her interest in imbuing her drawings with erotic overtones is apparent in *Untitled* (“*Are you coming down Jeannie? It’s about time for Howard ... May 6 ’49*”) (1949; Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York), which features a comely long-lashed blonde, dressed for an evening on the town, staring out of a window as her equally svelte friend beckons her from a doorway, and in *Untitled* (“*The Capt. + Jeannie come home from the sale thru the woods ... Fri. Nite June 24, ’49*”) (Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York), wherein a handsome seaman—clearly based on Buster Crabbe’s role as Captain Silver in the 1947 movie serial, *The Sea Hound*—casts an imploring gaze at a demure femme fatale as they stand in a murky nocturnal setting. (In a scrapbook from about 1948 [private collection], Corbett wrote summaries many of the episodes of *The Sea Hound*, noting the plot, the day she saw each movie, the cast of characters, and the friend who accompanied her. Ticket stubs, which feature Crabbe wearing the same type of mariner’s cap worn in the Hirschl & Adler drawing, were also pasted in.)

Corbett’s family albums include four photographs of her accompanied by the annotation “Taken by my Dad / at / Bethel Springs Water Co. / 1951,” which show her as a tall and slender twenty-one-year-old office worker who favored rouged lips, cat-eye glasses, and stylish clothes. Indeed, whether Corbett ever harbored aspirations about becoming a professional artist, illustrator, or cartoonist remains a mystery. Suffice to say, it was in 1951, around the time she appears to have joined the local work force, that she stopped creating her inventive and highly individualistic drawings.

Corbett, who never married, led a happy life that revolved around friends and family. She resided on the family farm in Delaware County with her beloved pets until 2013, when injuries suffered due to a stroke

precipitated her move to a nursing home. Her drawings, which she stored in her attic, remained in her possession until 2016, at which time her residence and personal belongings were sold in an estate sale. When informed that her artwork would be preserved and shared with the public, Corbett expressed great pleasure, a feeling that no doubt sustained her until her death on March 30, 2019, at age eighty-nine. Two years later, a selection of her drawings was acquired by the American Folk Art Museum in New York. Eleven of them—from a 714-page narrative aptly titled *The Catville Kids*—were subsequently showcased in *Multitudes*, the museum’s 60th anniversary exhibition (2021–22), which explored the links between traditional folk art and self-taught artists.

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