Dorothy Grider: Her Life In Pictures

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Members Enjoy New Harmony Ramble This Spring

ABOVE: Members outside the shrub labyrinth. Photos by Jonathan Jeffrey.

RIGHT: Laura Lee examines the Roofless Church designed by Philip Johnson.

LEFT: A small portion of the Owen House, built in 1830 with later additions.

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Dorothy Grider with her painting of Old Pete. Unless otherwise noted all photos for this article courtesy of the Special Collections Library, WKU.

Born in Bowling Green, Kentucky, to Rufus and Patricia (Fenwick) Grider, Dorothy Grider demonstrated an aptitude for art at an early age. Dorothy Grider: Her Life in Pictures

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Dorothy then moved to New York City, living at the Three Arts Club where all residents were female dancers, artists, or musicians. In return for working as an assistant monitor, Grider received free tuition for her studies at the Phoenix Art Institute. During this time, she paid her bills with commissions from freelance work, including illustrating beauty parlor posters, sheet music covers and Catholic holy cards. In 1939 Dorothy gave public school teaching a try by accepting a position in the mountains near Clinton, Tennessee. There a third grader told her she was "too small to be a teacher." Saving her money that school year, she returned to New York City. For the next two years, the U.S. Playing Card Company of Cincinnati, Ohio paid her a weekly salary of $35 to illustrate playing cards. Outstanding among her freelance assignments for this period is the October 1940 cover of American Girl, a Girl Scout publication. In 2009 Grider wrote: "That is what I wanted to do, magazine illustrations, but the camera came into vogue and photos took over."

Trading greeting cards for playing cards, Dorothy next accepted employment with Norcross Greeting Card Company. From stylized Christmas cards depicting Santa Claus, carolers, and altar boys to other occasion cards featuring cocker spaniels, a favored motif, Dorothy’s talent brought smiles to recipients across America. When her calling design caught the eye of the Ballet Russe, it became their official Christmas card. During World War II, Dorothy created several cards in the Norcross series for American servicemen. An article in the December 1942 issue of Charn magazine recommended them as a first “maneuver” for securing a boyfriend’s attention and heart. Likely inspired by a song popularized earlier that year by Glenn Miller and the Andrews Sisters, one of Grider’s cards featured an attractive Brunette under an apple tree with the wording “I won’t sit under the apple tree with anyone else but you.” Intended to be displayed, the card provided a small sheet of notepaper on which to write confidential messages that would be transported inside the card with only the words “To My Boy Friend In The Service” visible from the slot that was a small rectangle of materials nearly concealed from view. Dorothy’s notepaper was a popular notepaper for both soldiers and civilians during World War II. While notepaper was collected and traded like baseball cards, it was considered one of the most sophisticated ways to communicate with a loved one.

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Dorothy Grider was an independent woman, Grider "wanted to travel, to write books, to illustrate." In 1950 she went to France to settle the commission she earned from designing a set of limerick-themed napkins for Dennison. Originally planning to have a two month vacation and armed with $2000 in traveler's checks, the artist ultimately stayed for seven, completed several freelance assignments while in Paris, painted a portrait of the former model for Rodin's sculpture The Kiss (1889), studied art at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris and visited ten countries. Wherever she traveled that year, Dorothy photographed scenes that inspired her and found time to paint, draw, and sculpt. Other trips included Cuba, the American West, Mexico, Nassau, and numerous destinations across Europe.

Dorothy had diverse interests. While living in New York City, she enjoyed being a "first nighter" at theaters and was occasionally hired in the non-dancing role of a "super" or "walk-on" at the Metropolitan Opera. Grider turned her love of the opera and ballet into a children's book manuscript entitled "Bravo Goes to the Opera," but C. Scribner's Sons turned it down too sophisticated for children. An avid and accomplished photographer, Dorothy enjoyed woodworking, gardening, and swimming. The latter was perhaps a nod to the time she spent at Limestone Lake, her parents' private fishing resort at the northwest edge of Bowling Green.

While Dorothy spent most of her life in the northeast, she remained connected to Kentucky, particularly to her hometown. Beginning in the 1930s, the Park City Daily News, most especially the "Subs" and "What's New by Linda Lists" columns, routinely updated area residents on "Dottie" and her career. In the 1940s and 1950s, Louisville Courier Journal columnist Rhea Tolley also reported on her comings and goings. The Little Majorette (1959), which she wrote and illustrated, featured pennants and flags sporting a "W" in honor of all illustration assignments. Her work was exhibited in Kentucky, including four shows at her alma mater; in 1951 the Art Director of the Speed Museum in Louisville expressed interest in mounting a one woman show of her work. In the summer of 1957, Dorothy appeared on WCTI radio and signed books at David Halm's home and record store. When Miss Grider spoke to several hundred third graders gathered for a program at WKU's Kentucky Museum in 1987, she told them: "I want you to draw someone in blue jeans, put on your blue jeans and sit in front of my microphone."

Grider welcomed opportunities to exhibit her paintings and photographs. In 1937 the work of Dorothy Grider and Norman Rockwell hung in a New Rochelle, New York, public library. Dorothy exhibited her paintings at the Croome Gallery in New York City in 1946; one year later she had a one woman show at the Barbizon Hotel. In 1950, the Studio Guild of New York City selected Grider as one of four artists for a nationally traveling exhibition. The next year her watercolor of Notre Dame Cathedral hung at the Contemporary Galleries in New York City before being acquired by The Collectors of American Art. Dorothy's most recent show was in 2011.

Dorothy Grider passed away on February 18, 2012, but leaves an enduring legacy. As the illustrator of more than 150 titles, her work is available today in more than 200 libraries around the world, with the most recent installation residing at the WKU Special Collections Library and the Kentucky Museum. Over the years, Grider and her estate have donated to WKU more than 300 story, coloring and activity books; 75 greeting cards; 70 paintings and drawings; 20 paper doll sets; 20 playing card designs; and nine puzzles. Readers interested in her work and career can see an exhibit of her paintings, a partial recreation of her studio, and a sampling of her illustrations in a recently opened exhibit, Dorothy Grider: Art of Travel, Art of Home, at the Kentucky Museum. WKU Gallery hours are 9 am to 4 pm Monday through Saturday. For items not currently on display, utilize KenCat, the online catalog accessible from the WKU Libraries homepage www.uky.edu/library, to identify story books and other paper items accessible in the Special Collections Library. Summer, research room hours are from 9 am to 4 pm, Monday through Thursday, and 9 to 12 noon on Friday, with 9-4 Monday through Saturday hours resuming on August 13, 2012.

"When you strip away the rhetoric, preservation is simply having the good sense to hold on to things that are well designed, that link us with our past in a meaningful way, and that have plenty of good use left in them."

- Richard Moe, Former executive director of the National Trust for Historic Preservation