



Clara Mairs, Self-Portrait, Hazelden Collection

# Clara Mairs: American Modernism in an International Context

Research and Exhibition Proposal by Annika Johnson  
Faculty Advisor: Gabriel Weisberg, Department of Art History

The purpose of my research is to establish a chronology of Clara Mairs' artistic oeuvre, place her work in the context of the development of American modernism, and bring her work to public light in the form of a retrospective exhibition. Many of the enigmatic artist's paintings, prints, and decorative arts have yet to be documented, dated, and analyzed in a critical context. The Undergraduate Research Opportunity Grant has enabled me research important works in public and private collections located in Brooklyn, NY, and Minnesota, as well as archival documents scattered among museums, collections and historical societies across the country.

## Research and Exhibition Components



Clara Mairs and Clem Haupers in Andre Lhote's drawing class, c.1923 (Minnesota Historical Society)

For the first time since Clara Mairs' death, the exhibition will bring together paintings, prints, drawings and applied arts spanning her entire career. Spirited and independent, Mairs played a pivotal role in the development of female and American artistic identity in Minnesota during a tumultuous period of war and the great depression. Female identity, race relations, sexual identity, and artistic theory are central themes in her work. Mairs work provides a timely comparison as artists today endeavor to create their identities in a global context during a period of intense economic struggle.



A Group of artists at Pig's Eye Island, St. Paul, 1926

## Studying Modernism 1923-1929



Between 1923 and 1929 Mairs spent four years in Paris and studied with cubist Andre Lhote and was exposed to Parisian modernism. Her body of paintings and circus-themed etchings from this era demonstrate her study of Matisse, Cézanne, and Toulouse Lautrec and incorporation of their formal innovations into her work.



Watercolor: Study for circus etching series, Private Collection  
Etchings: Kneeling Horses, Untitled (After "Joie de Vivre" by Matisse)  
Oil Painting: Untitled (The Lesson), Private Collection



## Midwest Modernism 1929-1940



Depictions of the heterogeneous communities of St. Paul characterize Mairs' paintings and etchings from the depression era. Her prints gained national attention as she continued to develop formal modernist lessons learned in Paris. Her prints were featured in yearly print publications and were exhibited nationally, including the 1939 New York World's Fair.



Etchings (c. 1930s): Midsummer Night's Dream, Choir, At the Window (College of St. Katherine)  
Painting (c. 1935-1945): Untitled (Hazelden Fine Art Collection, MN)

## About The Artist

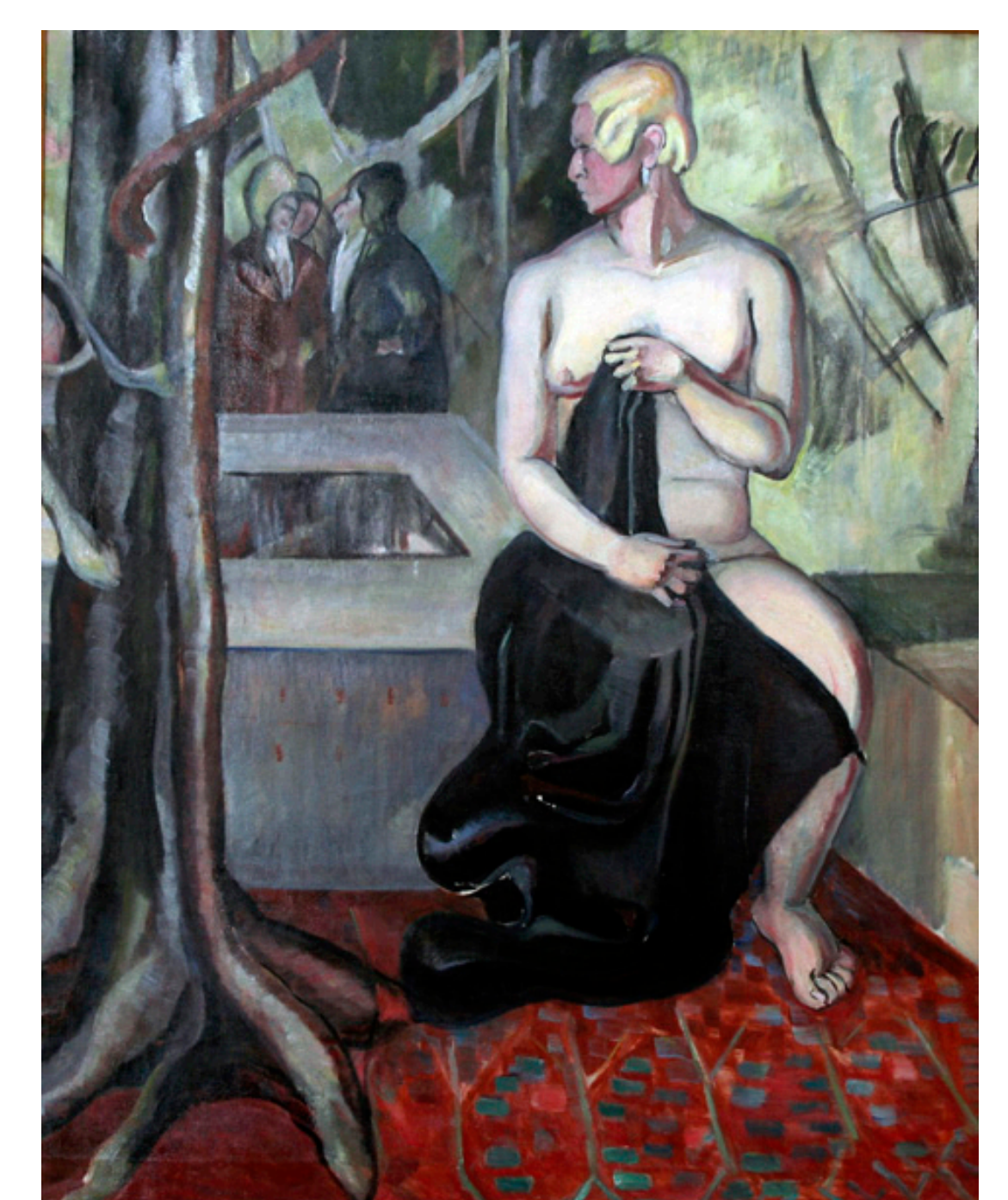


Clara Mairs in her studio at 377 Ramsey Street, St. Paul, 1961

Clara Mairs (1878-1963) was a Minnesotan artist whose career spanned one of the most dynamic periods in American art history when American artists sought to define their identity apart from that of Europe. A part of the bohemian community in St. Paul, Mairs did not conform to artistic or social conventions of her time. Her tender, witty depictions of everyday life are compelling psychological portraits of the artist, her subject, and America during the first half of the twentieth century.

## Research Questions

Why, aside from a few small local exhibitions and dedicated collectors, has Mairs' work and that of many other female American artists working in the first half of the twentieth century not been given critical attention? The commonly accepted canon of modernism has narrowed our understanding of art history and the American artist. The purpose of my research is to expand our understanding of American modernism to include artists such as Mairs whose works defy categorization.



Suzanna and the Elders, c.1923-1927 (Private Collection)