



# Helen West Heller

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Helen West Heller was born on a small farm in Illinois. In 1892, she ran away to Chicago supporting her artistic self-training in sculpture and painting, she did some work as a professional model and also took many menial jobs.

Around 1902, she moved to New York City and did embroidery and factory work, while concentrating on painting. After a few years, she left New York and wandered over much of the East and Middle West.

In 1921, bringing with her fifty canvases, Helen West Heller returned to Chicago. The Walen Bookshop gave

her a one-person show. At this time the editor of the Art Magazine of the Chicago Evening Post admired her poems and invited her to contribute weekly, which she continued for two years under the name "Tanka."

In 1923 Ms. Heller cut her first real woodcut and tried to found a woodcut magazine. The public did not take to her too abstract and unrealistic woodcuts. that led to her 1928 woodcut book *Migratory Urge*. In 1932, she returned to New York City where she would create her most beautiful woodcuts, many for *The New York Times*. She became active in social and political affairs.

She created two murals for the WPA and mosaics for a NYC subway station. In 1947, *WOODCUTS U.S.A.* a book containing 20 of her woodcuts, with quotes by American writers was published. She became an Associate member of the National Academy of Design in 1948. To comply with a requirement associated with this honor she created the wood block *Seasons*, a self portrait, which combined epic motifs from her life.

**Exhibited:** Art Institute of Chicago; Society of Independent Artists., 1920-22,

1934, 1941; Brooklyn Museum 1929-32; University of Washington, 1931; Salons of America 1934, 1935; Whitney Museum of American Art, 1935; American Art Congress 1936; National Academy of Design, 1942-46; Library of Congress, 1943-45, 1949 (prize); American Federation of Art traveling exhibition, 1943-1945; International Print Society 1944; Lowell Art Association, 1944; Smithsonian, 1949 (retrospective); City Library Association, Springfield, 1948; California State Library, 1951; University of Maine, 1952; Hempstead Library, NY, 1952.

**Permanent Collections:** Yale Art Gallery; Brooklyn Museum; Chicago Art Institute; Smithsonian (purchase prize); Library of Congress (purchase prize) New York Public Library;





Bryn Mawr College, Neponsit Hospital, Brooklyn; Lindsborg Artists Guild, KS; Illinois State Artist Guild, Springfield; Grosvenor Library, Buffalo; Berkshire Museum, Pittsfield, MA; and Newark Public Library.

**Author/Illustrator:** *Migratory Urge*, (text cut in wood), 1928; *Woodcuts, USA*, 1947.

**Listed:** Who's Who 1953 & 1947, Pettet's, *Dictionary of Women Artists*, Who Was Who in American Art, *Artists for Victory*, Fielding, Mallet, *Graphic Arts of 30s*; multiple Smithsonian collections, 1938 American Art Congress Exhibit Catalog, American Artist 11/57, Print Collector's Quarterly 4/42.

*The following more detailed biography is reworked from one by Scattergood Morse, with added material from articles by Dr. Ernest Harms: "Helen West Heller, The Woodcutter" , Print Collector's Quarterly. April 1942, p 3012 & "From Dark to Light", American Artist. Nov 1957, p 30, and personal*

*correspondence in our possession. The gallery photographs are either from Helen Garlinghouse or directly from Helen West Heller.*

Helen West Heller, born in 1872[83] on a small farm in Rushville, Illinois,

developed her intense interest in nature motifs and her love for wood as an artistic material from her father, a wagon maker and farmer, also known for making decoys for duck shooting and as a builder of boats. The artist recalled his knowledge and love for animals and plants and his whittling. "Of all career as a public school pupil the happiest memories are of summer suppers in our country home ... My mother served fried chicken and strawberry shortcake to [my] teachers ... and in my high school era, literary evenings in my principal's home ... this man was coaching me in Latin and Greek so that I might enter a prep school in the autumn."

Her formal art training was limited. Poor health, which she suffered from throughout her life, made her school years difficult, and two attempts to study at an art school in Illinois failed "although generously supported by patrons impressed by her early and distinctive sense of color and

form." The strong individualism of her artistic temperament could not adapt itself to the conventional training of that time. Later, she studied in New York and St. Louis. Throughout her life ". . . she was always engaged in some study, either of Chinese or European art . . . she was always writing . . ." and "coping notes from books, and collecting material for several others on theory and history of the arts." She was married twice, but neither marriage lasted. She writes "I have stumbled thru life with scrappy information in various fields."

In 1892, the twenty year old girl ran away to Chicago "trying to find work." To support her artistic self-training in sculpture and painting, she became a professional model and took many menial jobs. She lived an extremely isolated and destitute life and late in life spoke (to Dr. Ernest Harms) bitterly of the pains and suffering as a disregarded model - her only concrete relationship to the social world of art. Every cent she could spare during these early year was spent to hear operas and to mail the poetry she wrote to magazines. Her first success came when "Criterion" accepted a little sketch.

Around 1902, Ms. Heller moved to New York City and did embroidery and factory work, while concentrating on painting with little artistic or financial success. She left New York and for a number of years wandered over much of

the East and Middle West. "She felt herself an artistic and social rebel, unable to cope with life, and after a struggle with suicidal tendencies she retired for years to an Illinois farm." Shr scripted to buy art materials and stamps send her poems to magazines. After five unsuccessful years Jane Heep, a poetry critic of the time, discovered her and gave her a break in poetry magazines. At the same time a successful exhibition in an Illinois town gave air to her wings, and she decided to make a new attempt in the art world.

In 1921, bringing with her fifty canvases, Helen West Heller returned to Chicago. The Walen Bookshop gave her a one-person show which established her in the artists' world. At this time the editor of the Art Magazine of the Chicago Evening Post admired her poems and invited her to contribute weekly, which she continued for two years under her title "Tanka."

In 1923 Ms. Heller cut her first real woodcut. She had wanted to do this earlier but was unable because of lack of tools and satisfactory materials. Attempts were made to found a woodcut magazine (with a group of younger artists in Chicago) and her first trials were greatly acclaimed by this group. The public did not take to her too



abstract and unrealistic woodcuts. She had no technical instruction and needed none. . . "I was an instinctive and mature woodcutter from the beginning. I felt I was powerful and original in what I produced." During these first years of her real development as a woodcutter, she created a real novelty in the American graphic world. She cut a whole set of wood blocks to illustrate her poems. The whole as a modern block book or xylographic print was published in two editions under the title *Migratory Urge* by Franklin J. Meine, Chicago, 1928. Ms Heller remained in Chicago for ten years where she sold many of her prints and was a frequent contributor to the *Golden Book Magazine*.

In 1932 at age fifty, Helen West Heller returned to New York City where she would create her most beautiful woodcuts, many for *The New York Times*. She told one dealer who represented

her that her paintings were studies for her woodcuts, which she came to see as the final form she strove for. She writes of the difference between using the woodblock as a medium for reproduction of drawings transferred to the block and "the artist who is capable of creating as he cuts ... a difference instantly discernible to the sensitive connoisseur of prints ... woodcut[s] imbued with the easy, joyous spirit of the sketch." Although she did create some lithographs directly on zinc plates, she preferred the woodblock. Her love of wood led her to "buy a rabbeting plane that I can make ... frames as I think frames should be built - I do not approve of mitred corners."

She became active in artists' social and political affairs. Her painting entitled *Intersection of Thee Streets* was in the Jefferson School of Social Science, a Marxist study center closed by HUAC in 1956. According to Ethel Staples, a friend and patron, Helen referred to herself as a Marxist.



She had been especially involved during the period of the WPA Federal Art Project creating murals, the largest being a set of panels in a ward of the Neponsit Children's Hospital on Long Island. Although the work no longer survives at the Hospital for Chronic Diseases,

Welfare Island, New York City, in her mural about the life of Johnny Appleseed she tried to remind the incurable and aging patients of the places where they had lived and stimulate them to read about American history. She also did mosaic for a NYC subway station. A group of her murals

were recently unearthed showing her lover of vibrant color.

Helen Garlinghouse who had a gallery in Greenwich Village, said, "I handled both Helen and Maurice de Vlaminck, but I when I bought a piece it was always hers, not his, though I knew his were better investments."

In 1936 her print *Reforestation* was exhibited by The American Artists' Congress and in 1947, *WOODCUTS U.S.A.* a book containing 20 of her woodcuts, with quotes by American writers was published by Oxford University Press, New York. In a laudatory introduction by John Taylor Arms, wrote: "Glancing through an art magazine, my eye was caught by a series of reproductions of woodcuts that by their brilliance of execution and their emotional content claimed instant attention ... there are many highly accomplished craftsmen today ... fewer truly creative spirits and fewer still whose work combines both qualities to a high degree. Among these last I unhesitatingly place Helen West Heller." She became an Associate member of the National Academy of Design in 1948. To comply with a requirement associated with this honor she created the wood block *Seasons*, a self portrait, which combined epic motifs from her life.

