

MARY BONNER, OST ARTISTIC CONSULTANT by Penelope Border

Harral Ayres' detailed synopsis of activities during the 1920s decade of Old Spanish Trail development mentions San Antonio artist Mary Bonner as a consultant on OST artwork and signage designs.

Biographical materials included in the winter Mary Bonner Etchings Exhibit on display at the Witte Museum until January 16, 2005, mentions Ms. Bonner as frequently included in artistic groups meeting in the home of Mrs. Henry Drought, president of the Old Spanish Trail Highway Beautification Department. Text of the February 7, 1926, page 15, San Antonio Express full-page pictorial newspaper article by Penelope Border follows. Please credit Ms. Border and the Express when using quotes or parts of the article.

FOUND AN ETCHER'S CAREER AT THE END OF A FOUR-MILE WALK; AND, FAME CAME QUICKLY TO MARY BONNER, SAN ANTONIAN

by Penelope Border

MARY BONNER of San Antonio, who has been called "the greatest woman etcher America has produced so far," might easily use Byron's much-quoted phrase, "I woke up one morning and found myself famous."

Instead, being much more delighted and absorbed by the serious study of her art, apparently than by the swift fame its practice has brought her, she contents herself by saying simply, "Why, its just most awfully jolly. I've had a wonderful time." She laughs when she says it and seems quite as much puzzled and surprised as she is genuinely pleased and proud that her work has been chosen for such prompt and authoritative recognition in the artistic world. The gates to a career were opened to her at the end of what she calls the longest four miles in the world.

Less than four years ago, Mary Bonner knew no more of etching than the average person of cultivation and travel knows of that or any of the kindred arts. Last year, 1925 the critical art world of France admitted her on terms of fraternity and equality with the most important etches of modern France to exhibitions for three "Salon de la Societe des Artists Francais." It is an honor that many an artist has struggled and worked a lifetime without achieving. It is an honor that has come to the San Antonio artist with no apparent effort on her own, and while she is still so new in the labor of her art that she describes it with the amazed laugh as "most awfully jolly."

It was in the first of the two important spring salons, which preserve the traditional note in French art that Miss Bonner's etching of the tower of Notre Dame de Paris, seen from an old bridge at the rear, won the coveted honorable mention. While the degree of distinction begins with honorable mention and goes through bronze, silver and gold medals, they denote, according to Miss Bonner, not so much four different degrees of merit as the number of times that merit has attracted the coolly critical attention of the salon judges. It is regarded as highly desirable that they be won in sequence.

In the Salon d'Automne, which features the most modern expression of French artistic conviction and growth, the chauvinistic French spirit precluded mention or award being made to any but French artists, but the young Texas girl's vivid frieze epitomizing cowboy activities and characteristics was one of the sensations of the 1925 salon. Reproductions of that singularly freely and spontaneous bit of tined etching have appeared in numerous French, English and American papers and magazines and new adjectives have coined in tribute to her originality. One French critic announced that her border of turtle, snakes and bats, game-roosters and horned frogs was the one absolutely new motif in design since the Italian Renaissance.

The words inscribed on the certificate awarding honorable mention to "a Mademoiselle Bonner (Mary)" are formal as is appropriate to the towers of Notre Dame, seen from an angle. Less formal but perhaps just as appropriate are the French words which a special art edition of the Paris "Figaro" used as cut-lines beneath a reproduction of the cowboy frieze.

"De Mlle. Marie Bonner des dessius cruieux, representante des chevaux dans des poses

desopilantes durmantes de cavaliers impassibles, des 'cowboys.' "

Cowboys have been called many things - more or less picturesque - in their time, but it remained for French art critics to call them "Cavaliers impassibles."

Apart from the three salons of 1925 it would make a long story merely to give a list of the honors Miss Bonner's etchings have received. Four leading French art magazines have published illustrated articles on the brilliant work of the new American etcher. She was invited to exhibit in the Paris Exposition last summer. The Paris edition of the New York Times devoted a special page of photographs of her and her works and a sketch of her life. She was one of four artists whose work was given a special cablegram to the New York Sun in which her cowboy frieze was described as "both humorous and delightful." One of the cowboy etchings was bought by the British Museum last year for permanent exhibition there - a rare distinction to be given a living artist. Five or six American museums have bought groups of her etchings for permanent collections. Her work is listed in the 1925 edition of Malcolm Solomon's authoritative volume of "Fine Prints of the Year." Perhaps the rarest testimonial to the artistic value of Miss Bonner's work is contained in the purchase of a number of her etchings by a group of Japanese publishers who were in Paris last summer buying up materials for a representative collection of the best modern Western art to be published in Japan.

Miss Bonner insists that until 1922 the idea of studying etching had never occurred to her, and she says that she is sure that if she had looked a little stronger it would have never have been suggested to her. She was spending the summer of 1922 in Woodstock, New York, when the work of several lithographers in the artist colony there attracted her attention, and interested her to such an extent that she decided to make a study of the art.

"I had always dabbled a little in artistic things in a sort of boarding school fashion, but I had certainly never taken anything I had done very seriously," she tells. She was advised to go for lessons in lithography to an old engraver near Woodstock who was an authority on the art of stone engraving. He lived four miles from the camp, down a country road - "the longest four miles in the world I am sure."

Miss Bonner says, "I walked and walked for nearly two hours before I found his little house, and when I arrived, and he saw my exhausted state, he declined to teach me because he said I wasn't strong enough to handle the material and implements required.

"Why don't you try something light and easy, like etching?" he advised me kindly. That seemed reasonable enough, as he said it, and directed my attention from the chisel toward the needle."

In the fall of 1922 she went to Paris and spent six weeks going from studio to studio before she found the teacher of etching who satisfied her demands. He proved to be Edouard Leon founder and secretary of the "Societe les Graveurs Professionals."