Margery Hoffman Smith (1888-1981)

Margery Hoffman Smith was called the “grande dame of arts and crafts” for her work as interior designer of Timberline Lodge on Mt. Hood. She also encouraged the formation of the Asian Art Society at the Portland Art Museum in 1974 and contributed funds for a gallery at the museum focused on antique Oriental art. “Nobody was quite like Margery Hoffman Smith,” F. Herbert Hoover wrote. “When she stopped by my gallery [in San Francisco], the paintings always seemed to become somewhat brighter. She was, in the best sense of the phrase, a seasoned artistic observer, and the paintings seemed to recognize that quality about her.”

Smith was born in Portland in 1888. Her father was Lee Hoffman, who built the Morrison Bridge, the first bridge across the Willamette River. Her mother was Julia Christianson Hoffman, the first person to “walk across the Willamette” and founder of the Arts and Crafts Society (1907), now the Oregon College of Art and Craft. Smith was a lifetime benefactor of the college, and her large donation in 1975, coupled with a donation from Howard and Jean Vollum, enabled the school to develop in its current site on southwest Barnes Road in Portland.

Smith graduated from Bryn Mawr in 1911. She studied design at the Art Students League in New York and painting at the Museum Art School in Portland. She married Ferdinand C. Smith during World War I. In the 1940s, they moved to San Francisco, where Ferdinand Smith became a partner in Merrill, Lynch, Pierce, Fenner, and Beane (later Smith). In 1950, he was named to the board of governors of the San Francisco stock exchange.

After her husband died in 1959, Margery Hoffman Smith started an interior design business. Active in the arts, she was a significant supporter of the San Francisco Opera, the San Francisco Symphony, and the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco. She was a founding member of the San Francisco Society for Asian Art and a member of the Japan Society. Her home on Russian Hill in San Francisco was said to be the oldest residence in the city.

Smith is best known for her work at Timberline Lodge, a Works Progress Administration project on Mt. Hood. As assistant state director of the Federal Art Project, she was in charge of the handcrafted furnishings that were made for the lodge. She worked with the woodworking and metal shops to design and execute furniture and wrought-iron furnishings for the interior. Under her supervision, seamstresses on the Women’s and Professional Project created hand-appliquéd draperies, hand-woven upholstery and draperies, and hand-hooked rugs for the public areas and guestrooms. She also commissioned or selected oil paintings, watercolors, hand-colored lithographs, opus sectile glass murals, and carved linoleum murals to decorate the lodge.

About her work at the lodge, she told the *Oregonian*, “Carpenters became cabinet makers, blacksmiths became art metal workers and sewing women wound up expert drapery makers.…We made furniture from scrap iron, wood and rawhide.…The building dictated the style–overscaled and related to the great, snow-capped mountain.”

Smith was given Oregon’s Governor’s Award for the Arts in 1979. She died two years later.

Written by Sarah Munro

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