

The New Criterion

Books

March 1997

Not so innocent eyes

by [William Logan](#)

Review of *Exchanging Hats: Paintings* by Elizabeth Bishop

Michelangelo was the last poet to show much talent as a painter. In our narrow century, poets have with few exceptions confined themselves to the art of words: Pound plunked away at opera (with dismal results), Cummings was a rough-and-ready dabbler in oils; but we have been spared the sculpture of Robert Lowell and the ballets of T. S. Eliot. It is charming to find that a poet secretly practices another art and consoling to know he's no good at it. This is partly *Schadenfreude* and partly relief that talent is not a gift completely inevitable in its distribution.

After her death, Elizabeth Bishop's cheery watercolors appeared on her *Complete Poems*, her *Collected Prose*, and her collected letters, *One Art*. Modest, sweetly colorful, and full of quiet exuberance, the paintings transposed to the visual world the deceptive innocence of her poems. Indeed, they seemed to have been drawn by children—no set of parallel lines ever parallel, no circle ever circular, perspective lost in some twelfth-century muddle of vanishing points, everything thumbed onto the page with the spirit not of art but of need. "Her method," writes the editor William Benton, "for the most part consisted of making a simple drawing and, unceremoniously, coloring it in." *Exchanging Hats* gathers the surviving three dozen or so fragile watercolors and drawings (as well as two box constructions indebted to Joseph Cornell), some of them now mysteriously missing and available only as slides.

Poetry and painting are not antagonistic arts: artists can live without writing a coherent word and poets can be color-blind. Proudly diffident though she was about her verse, Bishop knew the difference between primitive poetry and primitive painting. Of her own paintings she said, "They are Not Art—NOT AT ALL"; and yet some of what we admire in her verse lies in just its amateurish, old maidish, slightly fussy, and unexpected graces—hers is the verse of an amateur who believes in the professional (Hardy's verse was the other way around). It is the primitive in her poems we respond to.

Bishop made a few botanical illustrations, one or two landscapes, and a couple of portraits, but mostly she painted buildings and interiors. Buildings offered the least resistance to her lack of skill. The earliest watercolor is of a small brick townhouse in Greenwich Village, its windows festooned with long vines of ivy, like wreaths of mildew. Bishop often positioned herself so a building stood foursquare opposite, eliminating any need for the confusions of perspective. The battlements of a school in Key West make it a castle, or a prison. A deformed bicycle has been abandoned outside, near a pair of trees with whitewashed trunks that look as if they were wearing tight skirts. Her other buildings can be slightly terrifying. The one painting of Paris is touchingly labeled, in her clumsy printing, "PALAIS DU SENAT PARIS FRANCE," the monumental stonework and balustrades outlined in

Chinese white, as if it were a Ferris wheel. Two statues on the parapet appear to be hailing a cab.

It is not much use talking of possible influences on her work. As the editor recognizes, there's a little Klee, and a lot of Vuillard (she loved the floral); but they have been filtered through an unyielding artistic sinlessness. Her wavering line resembles that of *New Yorker* cartoonists like Steig and Thurber, where the visual is the pathos of its own incompetence.

Bishop was attracted to the painterly, as an appendix of her remarks makes plain; but her watercolors (often helped along with gouache and ink) never got any better in three decades of practice, and there's no sign she thought to take lessons. Her empty yellow ship's cabin resembles the inside of a steamer trunk, and out the curtained porthole is the sea; you can tell it's the sea because the waves are little jagged v's amateur painters use. Those waves recall "Large Bad Picture," its bay "masked by perfect waves" above which are "scribbled hundreds of fine black birds/hanging in n's in banks." Her poems depended on the loneliness or unhappiness that drove her to words (often cheerful, but just as often rueful); painting was an escape from the pressure of the artistic.

Bishop must have recognized she had no gift for drawing people—the streets and buildings here are eerily empty. Still, in the one rendered portrait, her friend Sha-Sha (Charlotte Russell) leans (or floats?) jauntily against a grade-school blackboard. She's dressed for summer, the little smear of lipstick, the plucked black eyebrows beneath blonde hair, the darkly handsome eyes, and the knowing posture a kind of Rorschach. The self-possession of the figure exceeds the crudity of expression. It doesn't quite matter that her head meets her neck in an alarming way.

There's something tender in the one other portrait, of a sleeper who looks like a misshapen doll. In her poem "Sleeping Standing Up," Bishop wittily remade the world from the sleeper's ninety-degree-tilted point of view (some of these paintings are similarly vertiginous, and many almost dreamlike). Bishop was drawn to sleep (as many depressed people are), and people who spend a lot of time in bed are intimates of the ceiling. In one of the best of the still lifes, a hydralike chandelier casts gooseneck shadows on a large patch of ceiling. The editor calls it "untypically arty," and attempts to explain away the cropping; but Bishop wrote "Sleeping on the Ceiling" about another chandelier:

It is so peaceful on the ceiling!
It is the Place de la Concorde.
The little crystal chandelier
is off, the fountain is in the dark.

There have been many paintings of landscapes, but how many just of ceilings? (Michelangelo painted ceilings, but not paintings of ceilings.)

The difference between poetry and painting lies in their resolution of the visual. In "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance," Bishop wrote, "The branches of the date-palms look like files"; but they don't, not really, and not in her paintings (the branches aren't even branches—they're fronds). That is the advantage of poetry—poetry, in the act of naming, is the action of metaphor. The pictorial truth is another, homelier matter. The one painting where the visual approaches the shock of metaphor is a Nova Scotia landscape: there are grassy, overgrown fields, some white houses, a gray spireless church, and in the foreground a low field of blue flowers. Field? No, a pond that looks like a field. But it's not the least like a pond, more a field of flowers in which two rowboats are tossing.

A few allegorical paintings are even deeper within the poetic, allegories in the way her poems "The Weed" and "The Monument" are—dream visions all too nakedly cozy with the psychological life.

The most curious, a design for “E. Bishop’s Patented Slot-Machine,” shows a box with a handle labeled “The ‘Dream’” and, inside, numbered gears and a crystal ball. Where do you put the money? What is the prize? Is it the record of a dream, or only a “dream” slot machine? Does it produce dreams for a penny, or perhaps fulfill them? This, alas, is an unwritten poem.

In their wobbling lines, their clumsy childlike intensities, these watercolors reveal a little of a world the poetry concealed, a world of lopsided buildings, nightmarish night scenes, and interiors where nothing met at right angles. For a moment, their defenseless lack of skill lets us view that world through Elizabeth Bishop’s not so innocent eyes.

William Logan's most recent book of poetry, *Strange Flesh* (Penguin), was published last year.

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 15 March 1997, on page 74

Copyright © 2009 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/notsoinnocenteyes-logan-3378>