

Ninon Jordan Smith

Ninon Galloway MacKnight was born in Sydney, Australia, on April 5, 1908, one of the six children of Harold MacKnight, a wool broker, and Bertha Fanning, an opera singer. Sydney society being rather repressive, Ninon showed signs of restlessness early on. By age 11, she had begun publishing verse in *Australian Young Folks*. A gifted natural artist, she won a competition at age 12, and her sketch of Sydney Harbor was printed on the front page of the Sydney Morning Herald. Girl's schooling in Australia at that time fell into three categories: languages, art, and homemaking. Ninon chose art, and was trained by some of the best-known Australian and English watercolorists of the day. By 15, she was a regular illustrator for four major Sydney newspaper Sunday supplements, drawing children, elves, fairies, animals, cartoons, as well as publishing poems and stories. Here's a sample of her work at age 16:



At the same time, unbeknownst to her family, she was doing cartoons and sketches for what was considered at the time a “naughty” men’s magazine, basing her work on American cartoons of flappers. The naughtiest part about them was the depiction of legs bare to about an inch above the knee: permissible for children, but for grown-ups? Shocking!

Harold died when Ninon was only 18. He left the bulk of his estate to his wife, but each child was to receive a portion at age 21. When Ninon came of age in 1929, she combined what she had earned from her drawings with her inheritance and fled Australia for Canada, following her boyfriend Bert, whom she met and married in Montreal. Their plans to emigrate to the U.S. were thwarted when Bert, traveling on an expired passport, was denied entry. Ninon continued on her own, with plans to meet again in New York. They did, but the marriage was not a success, and eventually they decided to divorce. Adultery was the only ground acceptable in New York at that time, so, like many honorable men, Bert took the blame on himself and arranged for a “witness” to testify to a fictitious infidelity. Ninon, now living alone, agreed to meet the supposed witness, Bert’s friend Wilbur Jordan Smith (son of Ethel Sloan Park and Paul Jordan Smith), on the steps of the New York Public Library. When they met, Ninon took one look at Wilbur and fell in love with him immediately. After the divorce, a long and delicate courtship culminated in marriage in 1939. Ninon adopted her new husband’s middle and last names, becoming Ninon Jordan Smith.

All this time, Ninon had pursued her career as a watercolor artist and illustrator, doing greeting cards and children’s books. Her income picked up when she discovered that greeting card publishers paid “by the head,” that is, by the number of faces on a card. So she painted a lot of well-populated Christmas parties! Wilbur and Ninon’s first son Paul, born in 1941, grew up at his mother’s easel, learning to hold a pose for her drawings for longer and longer times, and also

learning to draw “somewhat.” From an early age, though, Paul wanted to write. His brother Ralph, born in 1943, showed signs of intellectual brilliance in early childhood, mastering chemistry and, later, a variety of Slavic and Classical languages. He was eventually able to merge these skills, translating obscure Russian scientific papers in bioelectronics for UCLA.

The family’s move to the San Fernando Valley in 1950 provided space not only for the boys but for Ninon’s “studio,” which was what one or another room became during the day. Ninon continued her career throughout the 40s, 50s, and 60s, eventually withdrawing from illustration to focus on landscape painting. Son Ralph’s suicide in March, 1965 was a terrible blow from which she recovered only partly after many years had passed. In the fall, she and Wilbur made an extended visit to Australia: her third visit since leaving in 1929, his first ever.

Ninon continued to paint and sketch throughout her remaining years, though increasingly frail and challenged by severe deterioration of her right shoulder. In summer, 1989, Paul and his wife Nancy moved to Los Angeles to help care for Wilbur after his stroke the previous fall. Shortly after Wilbur’s death in 1992, Ninon suffered congestive heart failure, but recovered sufficiently to remain at home and continue to paint and garden. After Paul and Nancy separated in 1995, Paul moved to Seattle, and in June, 1996, Ninon phoned him to say, simply, “Find a house and buy it; I want to move up there.” This she did in October, 1996, but two years later she took a fall from which she never completely recovered. Her last two years were spent in hospitals and assisted living homes, with frequent visits from Paul. At one point, she asked him to illustrate “The House That Jack Built” for a friend’s grandchild. Paul had difficulty with the dog being tossed by the cow with the crumpled horn—the cow was fine, but the dog was awful. Ninon, her right arm nearly immobilized, took the pad and drew a lively sketch of a dog sailing through the air upside down.

In the assisted living home, a new and wonderful friendship blossomed between Ninon and Paul’s dance partner, Janet Jensen, also a painter. Paul had bought Janet’s watercolor painting of a yellow iris for his mother, and when Ninon saw it she said, “I must meet this woman. Bring her here at once!” Paul did, and the two immediately became friends. By this time, Ninon was quite deaf, but she and Jan understood each other to such a degree that they could carry on long “conversations,” Jan writing a few words on a notepad, and Ninon answering in a strong, clear voice. Two weeks before her death, Ninon told Jan, “I want to make a pact with you: I will teach you everything I know if you will teach me everything you know.” The joy of this pact, though never fully realized, held Ninon’s and Jan’s interest until Ninon’s death on October 4, 2000.

For a view of the painting that Paul bought for his mother and which inspired her friendship with Janet, visit <http://jensenartworks.com/fine-art-prints.html> and click on the yellow iris.

For a biography of Wilbur Jordan Smith, visit the Archives page.