

KATHERINE GILES EIRK

Katherine Giles Eirk, 76, died of COVID-19 on December 20, 2020, in Louisville, KY. Her conservation specialties, which reflected her wide ranging interests, were paper, Fabergé, Joseph Cornell boxes, fans, and, closest to her heart, portrait miniatures. A person of outstanding intellectual ability, she was a respected paper conservator who contributed an early work on the science of bleaching stains on paper. Additionally, she was a much admired mentor to numerous paper conservation students, and one of the leading experts on the technique and treatment of portrait miniatures. Fierce in her protection of the works of art entrusted to her care, she saved her soft side for her family, friends, students, horses, and Abyssinian cats. She took conservation, but not herself, seriously, and she will be remembered by all who knew her for her sly humor, sense of fun, colorful word choices, and southern aphorisms.

Katherine was born and raised in Madisonville, KY. After graduating from the University of Kentucky, she moved to Washington, DC, where she began her conservation career in the Museology program at George Washington University, receiving a master's degree in 1972. Her thesis, mentioned above as an early influential work in paper conservation, was on "An Experimental Evaluation of Accepted Methods for Removing Spots and Stains from Works of Art on Paper". While at GWU she also did an internship with Charles Olin, then Chief Conservator at the Smithsonian's National Collection of Fine Arts (now the Smithsonian American Art Museum, or SAAM) and National Portrait Gallery.

During much of this same period (1970-74) she also worked with Robert Organ and Eleanor McMillan at the Smithsonian's Conservation-Analytical Laboratory.

In 1974-75 she taught paper conservation at the Cooperstown Graduate Program. Although she was only 5 or 6 years older than her students, they were astounded at the depth of her knowledge and confidence—as well as her humor—calling her "Kate the Great". Apparently this year in Cooperstown ignited in her a love for teaching as for the next 3 years she was a visiting consultant in paper conservation at the Intermuseum Conservation Association Training Program in Oberlin, OH, and in her future positions she welcomed both graduate and pre-program

interns. She was a gifted teacher who enjoyed mentoring students and her students remain both grateful and admiring.

In 1975 Katherine became a conservator at SAAM, specializing in paper but also expanding her interest in portrait miniatures. She worked closely with Robin Bolton-Smith, curator and specialist in the history of miniatures at SAAM. Together they presented lectures around the country, and Katherine, in addition to treatment, compiled technical and conservation information on the portrait miniatures in SAAM's collection for an unrealized publication. In 1986 she had the opportunity to spend a summer in independent study on the conservation of portrait miniatures with V.J. Murrell at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

Additionally, while at SAAM, which houses the Joseph Cornell Study Center, Katherine began a collaboration with Lynda Hartigan, the founder/first curator of the Center, which is the repository for Cornell's source materials, library, and hundreds of examples of his work. Captivated by the mystery and imagination of the boxes, Katherine developed an expertise in their construction while examining many examples in museums and private collections.

In 1985 Katherine left SAAM and established a private practice for the treatment of portrait miniatures. At the same time she began a relationship with the Corcoran Gallery of Art where as a part-time contractor she was an invaluable member of the conservation department, treating works of art on paper, portrait miniatures, 18th-century American silver, Cornell boxes, and fans for 20 years.

In the late 1980s she commuted to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York where she undertook the technical examination and treatment of American portrait miniatures in the Manney Collection. This was in anticipation of the 1990 exhibition and catalogue, American Portrait Miniatures in the Manney Collection by curator Dale T. Johnson, the latter of which incorporates technical information derived from Katherine's examination of the miniatures. In the 1990s, working with conservator Theresa Fairbanks-Harris and curator Robin Jaffee Frank, she examined the two collections of European and American portrait miniatures at the Yale Center for British Art and the Yale University Art Gallery, and treated many of the works requiring attention. This collaboration also resulted in an article in the Yale University Art Gallery

Bulletin, 1999, entitled "Miniatures Under the Microscope" by Robin Jaffee Frank with contributions by Katherine G. Eirk, p.60-73.

Other institutional clients included the Daughters of the American Revolution Museum; Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute; National Park Service; New-York Historical Society; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; SAAM; and the National Portrait Gallery.

In October 1997, Katherine married Ed Veazey, her high school sweetheart. During their happy years together, they moved to Louisville and pursued many interests, including traveling, antiques and ballroom dancing, making friends wherever they went.

In addition to the publications mentioned above, Katherine published a synopsis of her master's thesis, "An Experimental Evaluation of Accepted Methods of Removing Spots and Stains from Works of Art on Paper", in 1972 in the Bulletin of the American Group, International Institute for Conservation, v.12, no.2, p.82-87. Other publications include "Objects of Affection: The Conservation of Portrait Miniatures" (with William Wiebold), Preprints, American Institute for Conservation, 1982, p.73-84; and "The Conservation of Miniature Portraits", in Charles Fraser of Charleston, Martha Severens and Charles L. Wyrick, Jr., Eds., Carolina Art Association, Gibbs Art Gallery, Charleston, SC, 1983, p.147-150.

Katherine was a Fellow of AIC and served as Secretary of the organization 1979-1981. She also was Technical Editor of the AIC Newsletter 1982-1984 and a past abstractor for Art and Archaeology Technical Abstracts. In 1977-1978 she was on the Board of Directors of the Washington Conservation Guild.

Written by Dare Hartwell with the assistance of Ann Creager and Rosamond Westmoreland; remembrances provided by Marian Dirda, Theresa Fairbanks-Harris, Sian Jones, Antoinette Owen, Elizabeth Parr, Abigail Quandt, Anne Rosenthal, Kimberly Schenck, and Judy Walsh