

9-28-2001

Fieldnotes on interview with Jeanette Corine May, wife of late Walter L. Mayo

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Recommended Citation

Tazewell, Peg, "Fieldnotes on interview with Jeanette Corine May, wife of late Walter L. Mayo" (2001).
Interviews. 2.
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FIELDNOTES: MAYO: ART AND COMMUNITY

Accession number: MAC-PT-F092801.A

Researcher's name: Peg Tazewell

Event: Visit to the home of Jeanette Corine May, wife of the late Walter L. Mayo

Place: Jeanette Corine Mayo
2887 Clermont Road
Columbus, OH 43209
(614) 237-2732

Co-workers Present: Jessica Phillips, Professor Ric Sheffield, Dan Younger

We met with Mrs. Jeanette Mayo, widow and second wife of Walter L. Mayo, in her home, on the afternoon of Friday, September 28, 2001. Mrs. Mayo was joined by a representative of the Columbus Museum of Art, Ms. X. Nanette M. of the Museum had been scheduled to join us but was ill. Ms. X did not join much in the conversation, but seemed to be present as a support to Mrs. Mayo.

The home was a neat, one-story ranch on the southwest side of Columbus. It is filled with pictures of family, especially grandchildren and godchildren, and books and bric-a-brac with a religious theme. There is a clear African-American consciousness in the house, with several pieces of kunte cloth around. Mrs. Mayo was wearing a sweatshirt identifying her as a loving grandmother. She told us the house was a wedding present from Walter L., her second husband, in 1977. She beams when she speaks of Mr. Mayo, and I'd guess that their second shot at love (they'd each been widowed previously) was a wonderful love story. Mrs. Mayo often catches herself speaking of Walter L. in the present tense and tears up. She clearly holds his art and his legacy very dearly.

Professor Sheffield explained a bit about our project and the purpose for our visit; he had arrived earlier and had given Mrs. Mayo a copy of *The Community Within* project book. Except for Dan Younger, we did not take notes, wanting this visit to serve the purpose of establishing rapport with Mrs. Mayo. She was warm, welcoming and open, but a little nervous. We talked a bit about the exhibit at the Columbus Museum of Art, which we had seen the week before. Mrs. Mayo joked with the representative of the Art Museum, that they had "stolen" the scroll from the Ark of the Covenant and that she wanted it back. She seemed to be a bit disturbed to discover that only one picture of Mr. Mayo's continued to hang in the Museum. She talked about how overwhelming the exhibit and reception were -- she was nervous but felt like queen of the show! The representative of the Art Museum brought the Guest Book by that day, and we talked about the possibility that we may be able to obtain contact information from the book. Mrs. Mayo had not had the opportunity to view it yet, but said we could look at it at a later date.

Mrs. Mayo mentioned that we might be able to speak with Mr. Mayo's daughter by his first wife, who lives in Cleveland Heights. She might remember more about Walter O. Mrs. Mayo only met him in the last years of his life, when Walter L. had moved his father to Columbus, and he attended Bethany Baptist Church. The Church was where Mr. & Mrs. Mayo had met. They both were very involved in Sunday School, as Mrs. Mayo had been with her first husband.

Mrs. Mayo offered almost immediately to show us the work of Mr. Mayo hung in the house. Above the couch was a landscape, and there was a painting of Mrs. Mayo's daughter in the bathroom on the first floor. There were several carvings by Walter O. in a guest bedroom where Mr. Mayo had slept in the last months of his life while ill. There was a carving by his father that Mr. Mayo had called his own -- he kept it by his bedside in that room -- and Mrs. Mayo seemed to indicate that she wouldn't part with it. There were also carved bookends in the shape of horses' heads.

In the garage were more of Walter O's carvings, among them another animal team, a funny Owl with the moon behind him, and a very amusing pair of squirrels boxing in a ring. There was a large saw that Walter L. used beneath the carvings, which were stored high on a shelf in the garage.

Mrs. Mayo then took us to the basement of her home, where Walter L. kept his studio. According to Mrs. Mayo, the studio was known as "The Doghouse." It appears that little has been disturbed since Mr. Mayo's death. The room is filled with his work -- on the walls, propped up against each piece of furniture, with the homecoming banners rolled together on the floor. There are several sketchbooks strewn about, and envelopes filled with other sketches. One envelope is filled with 8 x 10 pastel drawings of the Apostles. There are many piles of books, many with a religious theme, and at least three large bibles.

There seem to be two over-riding themes of Mr. Mayo's work: religious imagery and animals, especially horses and farm animals. I am more drawn to the religious themes; the animals were competent pieces, but lack the passion and feeling is evident in the religious work. I do agree with Nanette of the art museum that the technical quality of his work seemed to suffer in later years. Mrs. Mayo told us that his hands shook, which made the brush strokes shaky.

Mrs. Mayo told several stories -- there are many paintings of their trip to the Holy Land in the 80's, with Mrs. Mayo included. One in particular shows her standing on the banks of the River Jordan. There is a portrait of Mrs. Mayo that she claims not to like. She removed it once from the wall but the next time she went in the doghouse it had been put right back up. She said that Mr. Mayo sketched all the time, even while he watched TV. Indeed, many of his sketches and drawings are of popular or television personalities: Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, and Jesse Jackson.

I really appreciated what we could see of the homecoming banners. The colors were bright and bold and the pictures well drawn. We could see the beginnings of the banners in sketches in one of the sketchbooks. Mrs. Mayo indicated that Mr. Mayo would begin meditating on the theme for this year's banner after Easter. He would find the scriptural verse that he wanted to use, meditate on it, and conceive the banner with pen and ink sketchings. The homecoming event

takes place in October. We only partially unfolded the banners, but Mrs. Mayo assured us that we could fully unfold them at a later date.

Mr. Mayo's role in his church, Bethany Baptist, was very important to him. Mrs. Mayo believes he joined the church in 1947. There are several plaques on the walls of the Doghouse acknowledging his service. According to Mrs. Mayo, Rev. Jesse Woods was Mr. Mayo's best friend. She related that she'd surprised Pastor Woods last year when she lent the church a banner for homecoming, but didn't have the opportunity to warn the Pastor about it before he entered for the service, and consequently he was overcome with emotion. She felt that Pastor Woods would be a good contact for us, and that he would also remember Walter O. Mayo.

We left after only about 45 minutes. It was a good visit -- we all got hugs when we left, which is probably about as good as it gets. Mrs. Mayo and Professor Sheffield connected very well by identifying many mutual friends and acquaintances. He very much helped to break the ice and to ensure that we will be able to meet with Mrs. Mayo again. She encouraged us to contact her whenever we wanted. Thursdays are the only bad day for her. She also agreed to look for pictures and other information she might have.