

# TO LIVE IS TO PAINT

Wilhelmina Weber Furlong,  
Dorothy Dehner  
& American Modernism

Essay by Art Students League Curator-at-Large 2022 Jillian Russo

Throughout its illustrious history the Art Students League has been a site of international artistic dialogue and a resource for women artists. This exhibition explores the creative exchange between two trailblazing women who met at the League in 1926, post-impressionist painter Wilhelmina Weber Furlong (1878-1962) and modernist painter and sculptor Dorothy Dehner (1901-1994). Although her name is not widely known today, Furlong was an influential transmitter of modernist trends. Her exceptional biography included extended time spent in Paris (fig. 1), where she was acquainted with Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, and Mexico City, where she worked for the Mexican government and met her husband, Tomás Furlong, who was also a painter. After moving to New York City in 1913, Wilhelmina and Tomás established a studio and atelier at 3 Washington Square and an artist colony at their farm

in Bolton Landing, New York. The salons and retreats they hosted became gathering places for New York abstract artists including John Graham, Stuart Davis, and Max Weber as well Dehner (fig. 2) and her husband, sculptor David Smith. Dehner and Furlong's friendship deepened Dehner's involvement with the New York avant-garde and fostered her development of a modernist artistic practice.

## Formative Travels

Although more than two decades younger than Furlong, Dehner's artistic career was similarly propelled by a trip to Europe that made her a conduit between European and New York art scenes during the 1920s. Born in 1901 in Cleveland, Ohio, Dehner was raised in a creative and politically engaged family. Following her father's death, the family was headed by her mother, a suffragette, and Dehner's

maternal aunts. Her aunt Cora, a professional pianist who had lived in Europe for many years, nurtured Dehner's musical talents, independent spirit, and interest in European culture. After the Dehner family moved to Pasadena, California in 1915, Dorothy became involved in theater, studying at the Pasadena Playhouse. In 1923 she moved to New York to attend the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. Unfulfilled by the collaborative nature of theater productions, Dehner sought more independence and embarked on a solo trip to Florence, Switzerland, and Paris inspired by Cora's advice to "look at everything without the distraction of another personality and reactions."<sup>1</sup>

Galvanized by her exposure to Cubism, Fauvism, Constructivism and the 1925 Art Deco exposition in Paris, Dehner returned to New York dedicated to pursuing an

artistic career. She enrolled at the League and sought out artists engaged with vanguard trends. She found sculptor Robert Laurent's direct carving class too traditional and switched to studying drawing and painting with Kimon Nicolaïdes (fig. 3-7). In 1926, Dehner met Smith when he moved into the boarding house where she was staying on 118th Street. She introduced him to the work of Picasso and Matisse and encouraged him to study at the League. The following year Dehner and Smith were married and they both joined Czech-modernist Jan Matulka's (fig. 8) drawing class. Along with Matulka and Vaclav Vytlacil (fig. 9), Furlong, who was serving as Executive Secretary, Treasurer, and a member of the Board of Control, was one of the few artists at the League during this period who possessed first-hand experience with European modernism. Dehner described her and Smith's impression of Wilhelmina and Tomás as "very much more sophisticated than any other adults that we had come in contact with up to that time."<sup>2</sup>

Furlong's achievements were extraordinary for a woman painter who began her career in the late-nineteenth century. Born in St. Louis in 1878, she started painting and drawing by age twelve. Recognizing her talent, her father encouraged her to take trips to New York to study at the League with William Merritt Chase beginning in 1892. She continued taking classes with Chase at his private school in New York and also studied with Emil Carson at the St. Louis Art Academy and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts from 1894-1900. She visited Paris frequently between 1897-1903, where she created drawings of French boots, which were used as designs for her brother Bernard's footwear company.

In 1903, following the recommendations of Chase and Carson, Furlong moved to Paris. Fluent in French, Spanish, and German, she attended Gertrude Stein's salons, where she met Picasso, Matisse, and Cézanne.<sup>3</sup> Furlong quickly incorporated the influences of

Post-Impressionism and Cubism into her own work. In her *Still Life*, 1898-1903 (fig. 10) the contours of shapes nearly dissolve into a study of brushwork and fauvist hues, flattening the composition and almost entirely eliminating the delineation between foreground and background. Within a few years, Furlong's work had become far more modernist than her former teachers. Inspired by Cézanne, Matisse, and Picasso, she approached the table-top still-life as a vehicle for exploring abstraction through an examination of form, space, and color. *Still Life*, more closely resembles Matisse's *Dishes and Fruit*, 1901 (Hermitage Museum) than Chase's still life paintings such as *Fish Still Life*, 1908 (fig. 11), illustrating Furlong's position as a pioneer of modernism.



Fig. 1 Photograph of Wilhelmina Weber Furlong in Paris, c. 1898. Clint Weber, Weber Furlong Foundation.

In 1906, on a tourist visit to Mexico City, Furlong was offered a position as an interpreter for Mexican President Porfirio Díaz. She accepted and spent seven years in the role while continuing to paint. During this time, she met Tomás, who was also working as a translator, and they traveled throughout Mexico, enthralled by the art, architecture, and landscape. According to Clint Weber, Director of the Weber-Furlong Foundation: "in Mexico, she experienced the



transition of the local art forms, as she described it, into a much less traditional 'souvenir hunter' version of the centuries-old Spanish style. Sophisticated colors, bright dyes, and Mexican clay resembling Spain's Talavera tiles caught her artistic eye."<sup>4</sup> In the painting *Mexico*, ca. 1906-1911 (fig.12), Furlong combined the post-impressionist style she was developing in Paris with Mexican ceramic and architectural motifs and a maroon, terracotta, and sky-blue palette. These colors continued to influence her painting even after she arrived in New York. Furlong was forced to leave Mexico City in 1913 when the Mexican Revolution ousted Porfirio Díaz's regime.

Settling in Greenwich Village, Wilhelmina supported her artistic practice by designing furniture and stage sets. Tomás enrolled at the Art Students League and during the 1920s studied with Kenneth Hayes Miller and Max Weber. In 1923, Wilhelmina renewed her membership with the League and began her administrative work with the organization. Their artistic circle expanded to include Weber, Miller, Rockwell Kent, Stuart Davis, John Graham as well as Dehner and Smith. Dehner recalled that "we immediately became friends" and "they introduced us to Jean Charlot and various people, and the Grahams, Elinor and John Graham."<sup>5</sup> Dehner and Smith's friendship with Graham, who within a few years became a leader within the New York avant-garde, would be pivotal to the development of their work.

### Modernism at the Art Students League

In the early 1920s, with the exception of Matulka and Furlong, there were very few artists at the League working abstractly. Dehner wrote: "Despite the freedom that we enjoyed at the League... abstract painting had not been represented there except for a brief period when Max Weber taught

in 1920-21. Matulka both as a painter and a teacher, was for that period a very avant-garde figure. He was bold in concept, unique in his palette, and unshakeable in his convictions."<sup>6</sup> Other students in the class, who went on to have acclaimed careers as abstract painters, included Burgoyne Diller, Irene Rice Periera, and Francis Criss. Dehner recalled, however, that she "was the only one in the class who had been to Europe, and it was nourishing and engrossing to hear Matulka speak of his firsthand knowledge of cubism, dadaism, and surrealism."<sup>7</sup>

The influence of Cubism and Surrealism on a small group of League-affiliated artists including Weber, Matulka, Furlong, Diller, Dehner, Smith, and Graham can be traced in the development of the table-top still life. A favorite subject of Picasso and Braque, Max Weber returned to the still-life format throughout his career, working in both abstract and representational styles. In *Egyptian Pot and Fruit*, 1923 (fig. 13), he transformed a Cézanne-inspired composition with angular, art-deco lines. In her contemporaneous painting, *The Ostrich Egg*, New York, ca. 1923-1931 (fig. 14), Furlong similarly combined a dramatic machine-age aesthetic with a Cubist compression of space. Diller's black and white crayon drawing *Untitled*, 1929 (fig. 15), skillfully simulates the use of papier collé, pairing a variety of patterns and textures created solely with dots and lines. Smith's *Untitled (Table Top Still Life)*, c. 1930 (fig. 16) juxtaposes an ambiguous assortment of items including a small plaster cast, a section of fruit, and an overturned top-hat, evoking Giorgio de Chirco's metaphysical painting. Graham, who studied with John Sloan at the League in 1923, painted progressively abstract still-lives from 1926 through the 1940s. *White Fish*, 1930 (fig. 17) combines influences of Stuart Davis's abstractions with potent Surrealist symbols such as the egg and the fish. Davis's influence is also apparent in Dehner's *Still Life (Bolton*

*Landing NY*), c. 1945 (fig.18), which features several bottles with bright, graphic labels, incorporating text in a manner Davis was famous for. Executed in luscious brushstrokes, the painting also hints at a subtext of symbolic meaning through the use of sensuous objects: ripe olives, an apple cut open to reveal a seeded core, and a gourd. Going beyond these Surrealist references, Furlong's painting *New York*, 1913-1923 (fig. 19) is even more forward-looking. She scribbles out the still-life objects entirely with painterly brush strokes, creating a composition that anticipates Abstract Expressionist works by artists such as Edith Schloss and Charlotte Park.

By 1930, Matulka was incorporating Surrealist elements into his still-life painting and Diller and Dehner continued to experiment with this direction as well. In *Still Life with Horse Head and Phonograph*, 1930 (fig.20), Matulka mixed sand into his paint, a technique used by André Masson, and selected evocative found objects such as the plaster horsehead, shells, and antique phonograph. Diller's *Still Life*, 1931 (fig.21) features a mysterious floating, gloved hand that presents two apple-like spheres. In *Virgin Island Still Life*, 1932 (fig. 22) which Dehner painted while she and Smith were living in St. Thomas, she transformed a decorative pitcher into a biomorphic form that is suggestively encompassed by a leaf shape. Although executed after she left his class, Dehner's palette and composition reflects Matulka's influence. Inspired by pieces of shells and coral, in *Untitled*, 1930 (fig.23), Smith utilized these organic objects as the basis for abstraction. The work Dehner and Smith produced in St. Thomas, where Dehner painted the local landscape (fig.24) and he created his first sculptures, was also inspired by a back-to-nature approach that they first experienced at Furlong's Golden Heart Farm and artist colony.

Fig. 2. Dorothy Dehner and Cat at Farm, 1931. Courtesy Storm King Art Center Archives. © 2022 Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, New York. © 2022 The Estate of David Smith / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photograph by David Smith

### Golden Heart Farm and Bolton Landing

In 1921 Wilhelmina and Tomás purchased Golden Heart Farm in Bolton Landing, New York on Lake George as a summer home. By the late 1920s, they began hosting artists, including Dehner, Smith, and Graham, in the rustic cottages on the property. The cottage in which Smith and Dehner stayed, which Furlong documented in one of her paintings, was nicknamed *St. Swithin's Tool House* (fig. 25). The Furlongs' advertisement for the retreat emphasized that their intention was to facilitate a connection with nature that would stimulate serious creative work: "Those who are looking for "Smartness"—for much frock changing—for veranda gossip—Bridge—Bohemianism—WARNING! Do not come here. The life here is real—wholesome—complete in its naturalness—Work and study, the response to the mountain—to the forest—to the magical lake---and relaxation that comes from complete freedom."<sup>8</sup> Furlong captured the beauty of the terrain in fauvist oil paintings such as *Golden Heart Farm* and *Lake George* (fig. 26-27).

The austerity of their lifestyle at Golden Heart, which was devoid of conveniences and devoted to the pursuit of modernist aesthetic ideas, is reflected in portraits of Wilhelmina by Dehner and Graham. Dehner's *Portrait of Wilhelmina Weber Furlong*, 1931 (fig.28) depicts her in a simple cotton dress with her hair pulled back in a bun. The high-backed chair in which she sits, the brooch at her neck, and her solemn expression all recall Picasso's *Portrait of Gertrude Stein*, 1905-1906. Graham's *Portrait of Wilhelmina* (fig.29) is equally reverential. Reflecting his interest in New Classicism, he rendered her face as an almost archaic-style head in monochrome flesh and charcoal tones. An engagement with the classical figure also appears in David's Smith works on paper from this period such as *Untitled*, ca. 1927-31 (fig.30) from Furlong's collection.

Inspired by the atmosphere the Furlong's created at Golden Heart, Dehner and Smith purchased their own home in Bolton Landing in 1929. For two summers in the early 1930s Graham lived in a farmhouse just a few miles away and would meet Dehner and Smith for dinner every Sunday. Dehner recalled, Graham "was a tremendously educational person in our lives. His knowledge seemed endless, his taste impeccable, his company alive and sparkling, his ideas challenging."<sup>9</sup> Graham painted his farmhouse walls with Picassoesque murals and gifted Dehner and Smith works from his collection including African art and a wire head by Alexander Calder. In 1933, Graham returned from one of his frequent trips to Paris (fig.31) with an issue of the magazine *Cahiers d'art* devoted to Picasso and Julio Gonzalez's steel and iron sculptures. The article inspired Smith to create his first welded metal constructions.<sup>10</sup>

Although Smith's interest in sculpture and controlling personality made it impossible for Dehner to work in that medium during their marriage, during the 1940s they both painted the rolling hills surrounding their home (fig. 32-33). In the early 1940s Dehner created her masterful *Life on the Farm* series. Inspired by the renowned French illuminated manuscript *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, Dehner's egg tempera on Masonite paintings chronicle her and Smith's activities on the farm in each season, including planting trees, slaughtering pigs, chopping wood, sewing, knitting, and art making (fig. 34-37) Reflecting on her daily domestic activities as a source for her work, she wrote: "There was much beauty in our lives in that unspoiled country-side, both in the way of life and the setting around it. Our common ordinary chores went on apace with David's great outpouring of his abstract sculpture and my own involvement with abstract painting."<sup>11</sup> In the late 1940s, Dehner returned to the imagery she had begun to develop in St. Thomas, inspired by coral and shells she and Smith

had collected. Working in ink drawings and gouaches she introduced what Joan Marter has described as "a repertory of biomorphs" that "celebrated the animate energy of these natural forms."<sup>12</sup>

Dehner left Bolton Landing permanently in 1950 and divorced Smith two years later, but the environment continued to inform her work. Two watercolors *Untitled #63* and *Bolton Landing #46* (fig. 38-39) created the year of her departure reference landscape elements in abstract form. In these compositions she combined thin washes of watercolor with delicate, precise geometric lines. The ink lines were sometimes added before the medium had completely dried, creating a soft, blurry effect. Even as she began to work in bronze and her reputation as a sculptor blossomed, Dehner continued to experiment with new approaches to painting, such as applying watercolor to create the burst effect used in *Untitled 10* and *Untitled 68* both from 1951 (fig.40-41). In 1958, Dehner returned Bolton Landing to retrieve a few remaining items, and described her emotionally-charged experience of the landscape: "I drove with some trepidation as I approached the foot hill country with its lush green growth and sweet pine scented air. Finally, I was onto our lane, the familiar lane, the small brook, the studio building, the butternut tree, the scrawny old apple trees, the younger, fresher one we had planted and then I was at the house."<sup>13</sup> Her admiration for the natural world, expressed in her fusion of art and nature at Bolton Landing, remained a frequent theme in her sculptures, including her elegant, lesser-known 1970s wood constructions such as *Big Rooster*, c. 1974 (fig. 42), *Weathervane*, 1975 (fig.44) and *Curve and Vertical*, c. 1977 (fig. 43).

While Furlong exerted an influence on both Dehner and Smith, the Dehner-Furlong relationship is an example of a matriarchal artistic lineage, a type of throughline rarely discussed within art history. After leaving Bolton Landing, Dehner continued to visit

Furlong, who had moved to Glen Falls, New York in 1952. Furlong spent the last decade of her life working in obscurity and teaching art to children and adults. Dehner sometimes met with her students. During the 1920s and 1930s both women were at the forefront of developments in American abstract painting, but their support for their husband's artistic careers made it difficult for them to gain visibility for their own work. Dehner finally achieved recognition following her 1965 retrospective at the Jewish Museum, although her accomplishments have typically been overshadowed by Smith's acclaim. Furlong's contributions to the experiments in abstraction that were percolating between 1913 and 1935 have remained largely unrecognized.

## END NOTES

1. Quoted in Judith McCandless, "Dorothy Dehner: Life and Work," in *Dorothy Dehner and David Smith: Their Decades of Search and Fulfillment* edited by Joan Marter (New Brunswick, N.J. Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, 1984), 21.
2. Dorothy Dehner, "Oral history interview with Dorothy Dehner," interview by Garnett McCoy, October 1965-December 1966. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 6.
3. Clint B. Weber, *The Treasured Collection of Golden Heart Farm: Wilhelmina Weber Furlong 1878-1962* (Marfa, Texas: Weber Furlong Press, 2012), 13.
4. Weber, *The Treasured Collection of Golden Heart Farm*, 25.
5. Dorothy Dehner, "Oral history interview with Dorothy Dehner," 6.
6. Dorothy Dehner, "Memories of Jan Matulka," in *Jan Matulka 1890-1972* (Washington, D.C. Smithsonian Institution Press, 1980) 77-80. Exhibition catalogue. Reprinted at <http://www.dorothydehnerfoundation.org/writings.html>
7. Dorothy Dehner, "Memories of Jan Matulka."
8. Quoted in Weber, *The Treasured Collection of Golden Heart Farm*, 50-51.
9. Dorothy Dehner, "Unexpurgated Memoir of John Graham," Notes on John Graham (not microfilmed), undated, ca. 1966. Dehner Papers, Writings: Series 4, Box 4, File 76, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C. Reprinted at <http://www.dorothydehnerfoundation.org/writings.html>
10. Dorothy Dehner, "Unexpurgated Memoir of John Graham."
11. Dorothy Dehner, "Life on the Farm," 1976 reprinted at <http://www.dorothydehnerfoundation.org/writings.html>
12. Joan Marter, *Dorothy Dehner: Sixty Years of Art* (New York: Katonah Museum of Art, 1993), 9.
13. Dorothy Dehner, *Untitled*, undated notes, Storm King Art Center Archives, New Windsor, New York.