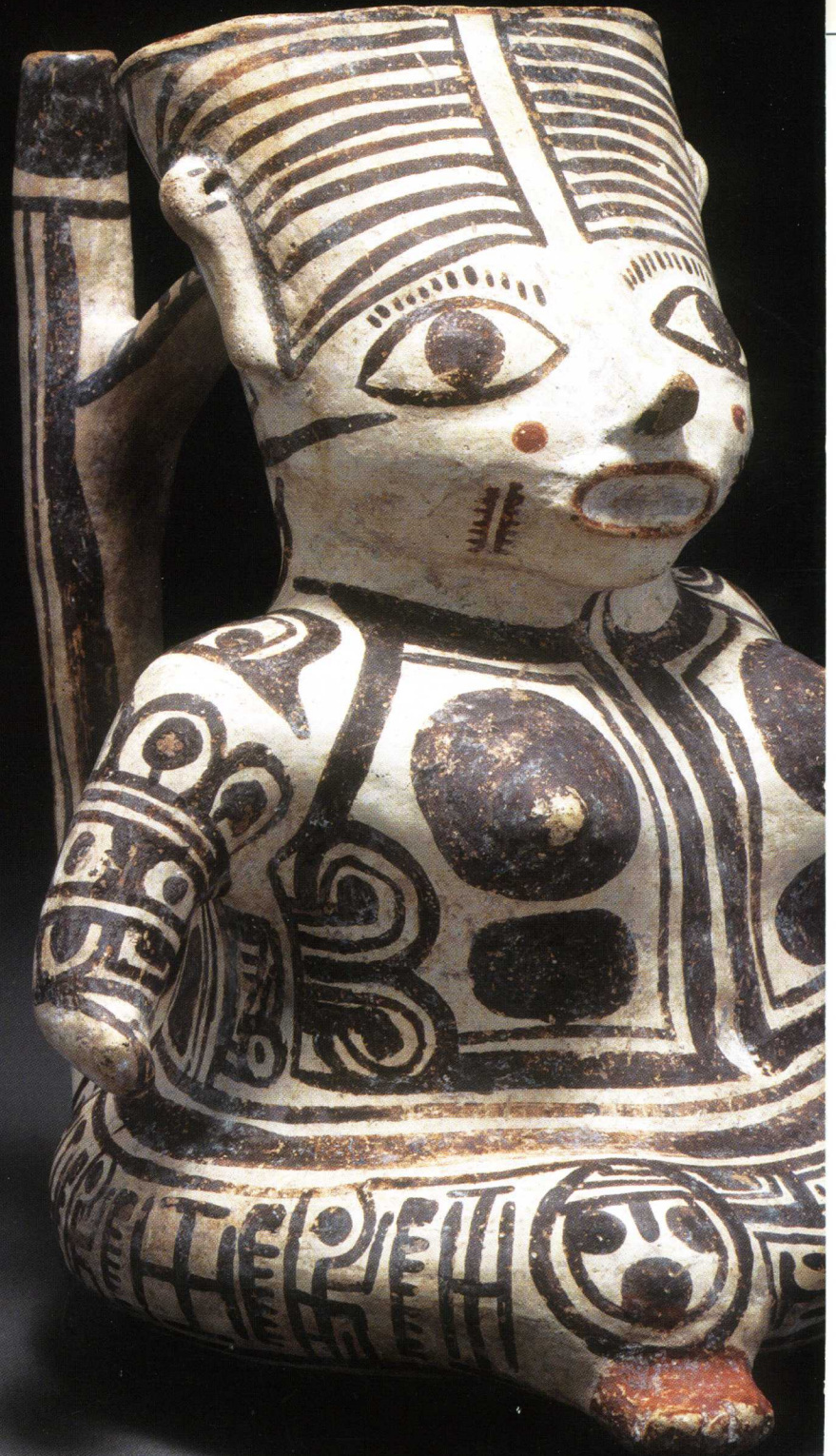
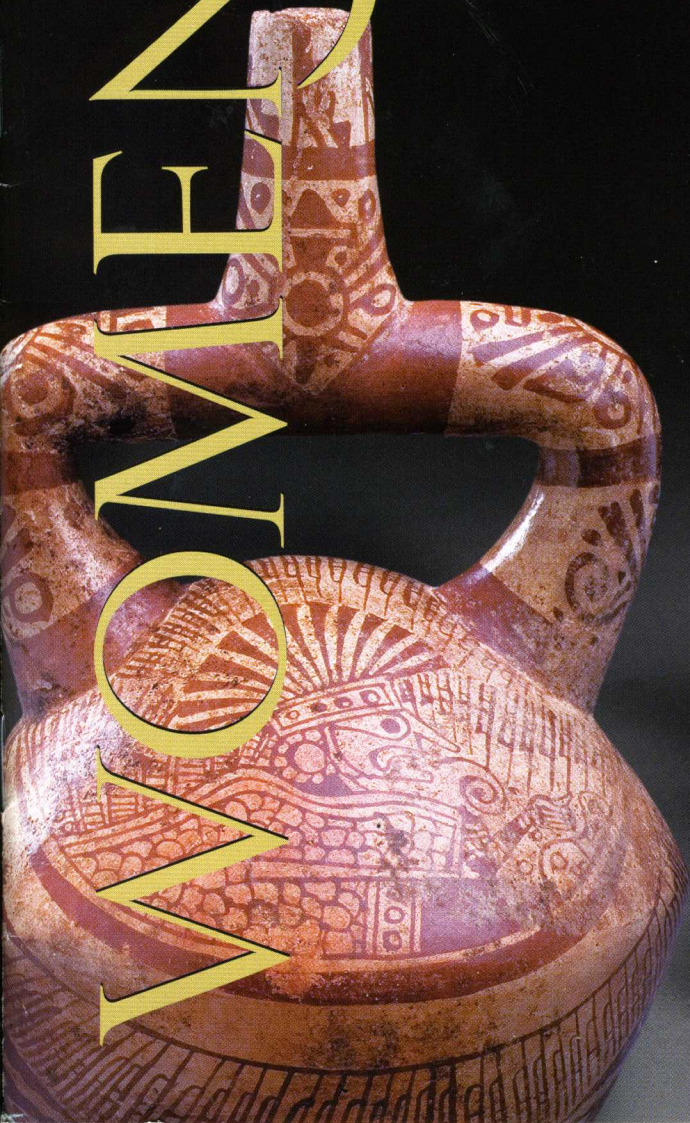


WOMEN IN THE ARTS

NATIONAL
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Isabel Bishop's *Leaning on the Wall*

by Elizabeth Schlatter

“In this particular kind of artistic expression the subject must seem unmanipulated—as though a piece of life had been sneaked up on, seized, and somehow become art, without anything having been done to it.” With these words, Isabel Bishop (1902–1988) described a small Jean-Honoré Fragonard genre painting from the eighteenth century that she saw at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Yet she could just as easily have been characterizing her own approach to art: that of a keenly observant witness who casually recorded the people and captured the vibrancy of her environment. In most of her paintings, prints, and drawings, Bishop depicted people apparently unaware of her presence, as if she truly had “sneaked up on” her subjects and quickly rendered their postures and activities. Yet, in reality, hers were highly controlled compositions that she worked and reworked until she achieved her desired effect.

Born in Cincinnati and raised in Detroit, Bishop moved to New York at the age of sixteen and soon enrolled in classes taught by the social realist artist Kenneth Hayes Miller at the Art Students League. She quickly became part of the loosely termed “Fourteenth Street School,” whose members included Miller—her teacher, mentor, and good friend—Reginald Marsh, and Raphael and Isaac Soyer. These artists focused on the urban setting

of Union Square, which, during the 1920s and '30s, teemed with workers, shoppers, street corner orators, and the unemployed—many of whom were passing through, eating lunch, or just loafing. In one of her earliest major paintings, *Dante and Virgil in Union Square* (1932), Bishop presents the park's populace as a multitude of souls shifting through a seemingly mundane underworld of the everyday.

Most of Bishop's artwork focused on people who appear isolated within the urban milieu. NMWA's etching *Leaning on the Wall* (1927) is typical

In most of her paintings, Bishop depicted people apparently unaware of her presence, as if she had sneaked up on her subjects and quickly rendered them.

of this approach. A lone man wearing a cap, slightly rumpled clothes, and a billowing jacket casually leans his right arm along a ledge. His stance suggests that he is watching something in the distance or likewise waiting for something to happen or someone to appear. Two possible companion prints, *Looking over the Wall* and *Youth* (both circa 1928), portray the same man in different poses. The subject of all of these prints is what Bishop and her peers referred to as a bum: an unemployed, working-class man who whiled away the hours

hanging out in the Square, talking with friends, playing games, and people-watching. In contrast to *Leaning on the Wall*, *Youth* presents a frontal view of the man staring pointedly at the viewer in a defensive pose, with hands shoved in his pants pockets as if he's about to roll back onto his heels. It is an unusual portrait for Bishop, who more commonly depicted people absorbed in their personal dramas rather than acknowledging or confronting the viewer.

Bishop specialized in capturing a slice of life. Most famous are her

depictions of women who worked in the service or clerical sectors, often in a moment of respite from their hectic lives: relaxing during a lunch break, applying makeup, or just chatting with friends. Particularly noticeable to contemporary viewers is her subjects' garb. Bishop's men always wore hats and even the indigent donned slacks and jackets. The women dressed in fashions of the times: cinched-waist jackets, platform heels, and hemlines characteristic of the trends.

The spontaneous effect of Bishop's artwork belies a laborious artistic process.

