

## HELMI

Letters from Elma

*By Wesley Wehr*

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*Nellie Cornish said to me, "Whoever becomes an artist dedicates himself to a lifetime of hard work." Someone also said, "Artists and saints are akin"—both possess infinite patience.*

—Helmi Juvonen

Among the major artists of the "Northwest School"—Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, Guy Anderson, Kenneth Callahan, George Tsutakawa, and about a dozen others—painter Helmi Juvonen has emerged as an important figure. Her work is imaginative, often playful, and bountifully original. No other non-Indian artist in the early history of Northwest Art has had such firsthand knowledge of Native American art of the Pacific Northwest. The only comparable figure would be British Columbia painter Emily Carr. Both Juvonen and Carr sketched the totemic art and rituals of the region, transforming their on-the-spot sketches into strong, distinctive artistic statements.

Helmi Dagmar Juvonen (1903-1985) was born in Butte, Montana. When she was 15, she and her family moved to Seattle. Her Finnish parents encouraged her artistic expression as a child. By the time Helmi entered Queen Anne High School, she was already an accomplished artist. She continued to develop her talent at the Cornish School (now Cornish College of the Arts) and appears to have been a highly motivated, talented, and hard-working student. Boxes of notebooks from these early days attest to her passion for drawing.

Helmi made a respectable living by selling prints to clients like Frederick & Nelson and making sketches for the *Seattle Times*. Later in life she sold prints at Seattle's Pike Place Market—"thousands of prints" as she herself said. Although many of these prints were loose and whimsical, Helmi could also draw with the precision of a scientific illustrator. Her more personal work was intimate, delicate and joyful. Contemporary artists like Morris Graves, Mark Tobey and Guy Anderson admired and collected her work.

Helmi was also closely connected to the Washington's Native American culture. She was often a guest at important ceremonies, sketching what she saw. Her Indian friends called her "Northern Light."

When I first met Helmi in Seattle's University District during 1950, I was enchanted by her unique personality. She was so delightfully colorful. Her eccentricities were lively and charming. Her personality was as colorful and distinctive as her pictures. And even her hero-worship of painter Mark Tobey was touching in its respectfulness for his privacy. But something started to happen to her. She became obsessed with Tobey; she complained that people, sometimes even old friends, were trying to put a hex of sorts on her. She became increasingly obsessive, at times

acutely suspicious and paranoid. She had become, for lack of a better description, "deeply disturbed," and there were frequent public complaints and private concerns about her often disruptive behavior. Perhaps in a different setting Helmi, who incidentally was also painting some of her most powerful and original works at that very time, might have been more at home. The very traits that made her "socially inappropriate" in Seattle may have been those of a kind of shamanistic "holy person" in a different society, such as a Native American tribal setting.

In 1959, at age 56, Helmi was taken to Northern State Hospital in Sedro Woolley for clinical evaluation. (She had reputedly already been diagnosed in 1930 as "manic-depressive"—what we presently call "bi-polar.") The following year she became a ward of the state and was transferred to the Oakhurst Convalescent Center at Elma. There she remained until her death in 1985. I wrote to her, asking if she would document in her letters to me an account of her early years. Where and with whom had she studied art? How had she managed to make a living? My intention was to suggest a project that would help occupy her attention while she was uprooted, away from her home in Edmonds, and experiencing a traumatic time in her life. The letters she wrote me from Elma during 1960 constitute a significant amount of information about her early years as an artist. They also document Helmi's ability to remain joyfully creative in circumstances that would have defeated a less disciplined and imaginative person.

Helmi's letters from Elma during the years she was there attest to how much she liked Elma and how well cared for she was at the Oakhurst Convalescent Center. During those years she continued to paint and draw. In 1975 she began to paint new works for the many exhibitions that were held during the final decade of her life. She often talked about leaving there and having a house of her own again, but as she grew older it is highly doubtful that she could have managed very well on her own. At Oakhurst she had an assured roof over her head, regular meals, professional medical care, and the freedom to spend part of each day in town or going for jaunts to Seattle or nearby places with the many friends who came regularly to visit her. She sent and received so many letters and presents from friends and pen pals that her room at Oakhurst sometimes looked like a miniature post office.

The following letters are among the Helmi Juvonen papers and those of the author in the care of the University of Washington Libraries (Manuscripts, Special Collections, University Archives), Seattle. Helmi's letters have been excerpted and edited in order to provide an introductory account of her early years as a young artist and friend of many other Northwest artists.

*Northern State Hospital  
Sedro Woolley, WA  
21 March 1960 [excerpt]*

*Dear Wes,*

*Just heard I will be going to the new place [the Oakhurst Convalescent Center at Elma, Washington] next week - I don't know exactly where it is - but John [John Uitti, University Way picture framer and close friend of Helmi, Pehr Hallsten, Mark Tobey, and many other artists] can find out.*

*Elma, Washington  
26 March 1960 [excerpt]*

*Dear Wes & John [Uitti] & everyone –*

*I am at Oakhurst near Elma - a small neat little town surrounded by pastures - small woods & many trees - Baptist ladies came after us in cars last Wednesday & we went to the Sunday school rooms & played games - checkers - dominoes - Chinese checkers & other games - then all sang songs & coffee & cookies were served - Tuesday ladies came & we played Bingo with prizes for everyone - this is a nice quiet place & all are pleasant - it is on the road to Hoquiam & Aberdeen - visiting days are every day - come when you can.*

*Elma, Washington  
25 April 1960 [excerpt]*

*Dear Wes –*

*Just came back from Baptist Sunday school & children - we have a new minister from California - with a son named Mark! - I also discovered many hymns with words written by Charles Wesley & wondered if he were related to the well-known Wesley of early days.*

*The "Blue Mountain Boys" - professional cowboy & folk-song singers came again yesterday with many familiar songs & some new ones - they get them soon after they are written & before they become popular on radio & television.*

*Am still studying notes & pictures in Boas' "Primitive Art" & like the Haida things much. The Salvation Army band was here this afternoon singing - playing marches & hymns.*

*Elma, Washington  
22 May 1960 [excerpt]*

*Dear Wes,*

*Went to Baptist church ce matin [this morning] - the school teacher preacher spoke on astronomy & the infinity of space.*

*Elma, Washington  
20 June 1960 [excerpt]*

*Dear Wes -*

*I know how frank Zoe [art dealer Zoe Dusanne, who represented Tobey in Seattle during the early 1950s] is with her opinions! - am glad she has a good show - it is not always easy to acquire a collection of good paintings & realize few truly have the ability to appreciate them - Boas said in primitive society - as in our own - few are they who create and appreciate beauty.*

*Of course we know & understand [Mark Tobey's] paintings for we are of the initiated - possessing an inborn appreciation of truly great work - a reflection of the Creator - of the artist - it is something bigger - something beyond himself - he is merely the medium thru which the deity finds expression - you have heard "Hitch your wagon to a star - make the stars your camp - the Deity your light - then will divine secrets & heavenly mysteries be revealed to you" - I was told this at Queen Anne High - they wanted me to go to the U. & to [the] Pratt Institute [School of Art and Design, Brooklyn, NY] - understanding and appreciation go hand in hand - man clings to familiar things - to venture out into vast new mental realms takes courage.*

*Glad you can go to Oregon - I love it down there - the people were so kind - a friend said "kindness is the most important thing in the world" - he was called "the miracle man" (a doctor who said it was merely due to consideration of others).*

*When I come home I will dig up a piano someplace so you can practice all you want - hello to Mark [Tobey] & Per [Tobey's long-time companion, painter Pehr Hallsten] & all our friends - love (xxx) Helmi*

Although some may categorize Helmi as a naïve painter, she actually had quite a bit of formal art training and continued to educate herself throughout her life. She once told me and her friends Jean Russell and Gary Lundell, "When I studied at Cornish, Miss Cornish [Nellie C. Cornish, founder and director of the Cornish School] taught us to be practical if we wanted to be artists." The following letters show how Helmi combined a remarkable technical background in the arts with great ingenuity in living by her artistic wits.

*Elma, Washington  
4 April 1960 [excerpt]*

*Dear Wes & John [Uitti] & everyone -*

*Was rereading your letters about my work. When I was small my father used to do pencil sketches for us & I learned much from my older sister about watercolors - for small children want to do what the bigger ones are doing. We always had good paintings in our home which influenced me much. The first artist I knew was Ambrose Patterson altho I did not study with him, we visited his home & classes on the campus.*

*I studied illustration with William Horace Smith (private lessons) who later became director of the old Seattle Art School - here we studied with Francis Tadema (Holland Dutch) doing portraits - heads & the whole figure - we even had to draw a skeleton - learning the names of the bones & draw all the muscles - Tadema took us to Woodland Park [Zoo in Seattle] to draw moving animals & at this time we started going to the anthropology department on Saturdays & drawing there - doing the moving animals at Woodland Park started me on drawing action pictures - as the dancing & drumming Indians at their ceremonials on the reservations.*

*My first exhibit of Indian art was at Harry Hartman's bookshop [in downtown Seattle] - (Mrs. [A. S.] Kerry [first president] of the Museum & Art Foundation arranged it).*

*Elma, Washington  
11 April 1960 [excerpt]*

*Dear Wes & John [Uitti] & all -*

*Wes dear - back to my work - I made rag dolls while at Queen Anne Hi. & sold them to department stores - then I did a few pen & ink sketches for Marie Newberg who had the Virginia Boren column in the Seattle Times - this I did thru the Music & Art Foundation - the Kerrys - Mrs. Alonzo Condon & other old timers - I also did sketches of Indians for the news section during Potlatch - these potlatches were very interesting - at them I met the first Yakimas - old Job Charlie in his chief's headdress & camping in tepees - White Eagle a Chippewa & his family also were here selling beads made of colored wild rice - I did sketches - dozens of them - of all these people along with the beaded-bags & baby cradles & etc.*

*Before the [Seattle] art museum was built [1931-32] we had the Fine Art Society with a gallery - here I exhibited dolls - I believe the old Seattle Art School group invited & urged Dr. [Richard E.] Fuller [founder and director of the Seattle Art Museum] to come to Seattle.*

*Write when you can - have you heard from Morris [Graves]? - love (xxx) Helmi*

*Elma, Washington  
17 April 1960 [excerpt]*

*Dear Wes,*

*Back to notes on my work - after childrens & adult classes (nude drawing) at the Seattle Art School I did work for society people - a fish costume & invitations to a big ball the John Eddys gave - invitations for Bill Bolcolm's (lumber) birthday party - favors for a party given by Mrs. Nathan Eckstein (Johanna Eckstein's mother) & hundreds of favors - place cards - centerpieces & a bridal window-display of dolls (like puppets) for Frederick & Nelsons - I also did dance programs of a miniature portrait of Marcella Clapp announcing her engagement to Donald McDermott (original owners of Bon Marche).*

*Then I made a large mural of dolls of all nations in national costumes for Bon Marche's toy department - which they had for many years in succession - another year I made designs for the whole toy department for Christmas - a tremendous amount of ideas.*

*Elma, Washington  
25 April 1960 [excerpt]*

*Dear Wes,*

*More about my work - After Seattle Art Club School I did a calendar ([Princess] Angeline & Chief Seattle) design for Kristoferson milk company - a Christmas card of Mt. Rainier for Lowman & Hanfords [a Seattle stationery and art supply store] - sewed (by hand) trousseaus for Harvey Wright's (window display man at Bests) wife & trimmed hats for [jeweler] Bill Staadecker's dad's place.*

*I worked at Cascade Fixture Co. where I learned drafting - printing & about Greek & French design - then Mrs. John Eddy gave me a scholarship to Cornish to study with Walter Reese (Ebba Rapp McLoughlin - sculpture & Henrietta English Woessner were among the students) - I illustrated "Alice in Wonderland" - one summer I studied puppetry with Richard Odlin - (Glen Kerry Trimble & Florence Agen - sister of Mrs. Cebert Baillargeon - a very good friend of Richard Fuller's - made "Jack & the Bean-stalk" for Junior League-) - I did Romeo & Juliet [puppets] when I was studying puppetry with Richard Odlin at the Cornish, Ellen von Volkenburg (Mrs. Maurice Brown) who has a theatre in London was teaching dramatics & was much interested in Shakespeare - I did Romeo & Juliet - she started Paul Robeson in Othello in London.*

*Nellie Cornish sent me to Richard Fuller & I began modeling figures out of clay - a Nativity - a Mexican Market scene - & figures from the secret-society ceremonial at the Malahat - Vancouver Island, B.C. [now in Nordic Heritage Museum collection] - the Junior League gave me \$500 for the Indian diorama - mother Fuller [Mrs. Eugene Fuller] bought a tempera of a circus for \$250 at a N.W. Annual & I started doing more large temperas on canvas for every N.W. Annual.*

*I also exhibited prints at the print annual at the Library of Congress in Wn. D.C. & at Philadelphia (courtesy of Richard [Fuller]'s sister) I got a \$10.00 prize for a litho at the [Seattle] Art Museum & a \$50.00 prize there for a poster (from Lowman & Hanford).*

*"hello" to all - love (xxx) Helmi*

*Elma, Washington  
1 May 1960 [excerpt]*

*Dear Wes & everyone -*

*I worked for [painter] Jacob Elshin when he was in the White building - folding Christmas cards which he designed & painted - then I sketched & had [my sketch] autographed [in 1934 by violinist] Fritz Kreisler - Rolland Denny at 86 (he was 2 months old when the first pioneers landed at Alki Point) - [actress] Mary Pickford - Don Blanding (artist & poet) - Langley & last [of all] [Haile] Selassie [Emperor of Ethiopia]. I also wrote poetry - Mrs. A. S. Kerry wanted me to illustrate & sell it - especially the children's poems. I almost got a studio on Capitol Hill - the old Episcopal Sunday School from Bernard Pelly - British Consulate & father of Thomas Minor Pelly - who has been in Washington, D.C.*

*On the Federal Art Project under Bruce Inverarity (his father Duncan I. first got me interested in Canadian Indians) - I designed hooked rugs - floral designs & authentic Indian designs (copied from books by Bruce) - these were exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum - then the Navy took over (war) & I worked with Lieut. Roberts in the camouflage division doing research work at the [Seattle] Public Library.*

*On the Project were Tobey - Morris Graves - Fay Chong - Jacob Elshin - Andy Chinn - [Julius] Twohy [a Ute Indian with whom Helmi visited some of the Indian ceremonies] - Hans Bok & Dick Correll (now in N.Y.) - a lame boy who did beautiful watercolors - Agatha Kirsch (flowers). I sketched at Hooverville for 1 month (along with all the other artists) - the old shacks made of packing boxes & scraps. Hope you had a nice May Day - love (xxx) Helmi*

*Elma, Washington  
16 May 1960 [excerpt]*

*Dear Wes,*

*After studying with Walter Reese & Richard Odlin at the Cornish, I studied lithography with Emelio Amero (a Mexican now at the U. of Oklahoma) at the same school - we used Bavarian litho stones & had a hand press such as [U.W. faculty printmaker] Glen Alps now uses - I used sensitized zinc sheets which are easier to handle but must be run off on a large press owned by lithographic companies.*

*After the Navy Research I went to Boeings & worked in mechanical equipment dept. doing pencil sketches of isometric perspectives - also went to the University [of Washington] nite-school & studied under [Charles E.] Douglas (engineering & mechanical drawing) who said I was a genius! - used to have coffee & pie with [sculptor] Dudley Pratt during coffee break.*

*Then I made full size patterns for planes in master-lay-out (with a silver - not lead - pencil) - then in the Electrical Dept. we studied the fundamental theory of electricity & the atomic theory (in preliminary design they were designing irons - refrigerators & stoves using atomic heat) - Mitch Berry (in charge of mechanical equipment) wanted me to study calculus at the U. so I could go into preliminary design.*

*I did fashion watercolors for a dressmaker across the street from Magnin's Fifth Ave. store - also watercolors of "Milky Way - my white kitty given me by Jacob Elshin & of "Figaro" a tabby-cat.*

*Then I went to night-school at the Potlatch Pottery & learned casting & modeling in clay (as Richard Odlin taught in his puppet class at Cornish).*

*I continued going to the Indian ceremonies at La Conner - Lummi - Yakima - Colville (Nez Perces live there - it means "pierced noses") and Vancouver Island. I specialized in face-paintings & had dozens & dozens of pencil sketches showing various markings.*

*At the spirit-dances in the smoke-houses the four big fires on the dirt floor almost roasted our faces - while our backs almost froze from the cold-wind blowing thru the wide cracks between the boards! - In olden times it was bad manners to move from the seat given to guests & they actually had blisters on their legs from the hot fire.*

Helmi Juvonen wrote often to Morris Graves. In the following letter to him she describes attending secret society initiation rites on Vancouver Island.

*Elma, Washington  
17 September 1975 [excerpt]*

*Dear Morris,*

*Pine trees are still & quiet - mostly moving - all the wild flowers have gone to seed! - I finally got paint and will paint my storage box tomorrow. I have a good book, North American Mythology. It starts with bundled-up Eskimoes and then to Tlingits of Alaska and their fine hats & garments & Chilcat aprons - it shows the interior of a home on Nootka Sound, Vancouver Island.*

*When I went to the initiation of a secret society (10 initiated) it was in a long house with fires in the middle of the floor - great chunks of wood! - babies slept on an overhanging shelf on top of the door - not even a shelf to keep them in - bigger children fell asleep on long benches where spectators sat - everyone has a place to sit - the "guests" (initiated) came in black robes with wooden carved paddles & a big, big black headdress with feathers on top - only a few are initiated - and we had stew & bread.*

*I heard my exhibit [at the Pacific Northwest Arts Center, Seattle Art Museum] was a good one!! (from Wes) he said it did come out lovely after working on it! - keep happy - eat well - fruit & vegetables & good things! - love (xxx) Helmi*

The reciprocal fondness that painter Morris Graves had for Helmi is reflected in his letters and postcards to her - for instance:

*Kathmandu, Nepal  
January 14, '71*

*Helmi dear,*

*In our next life lets be born here [in Kathmandu]! Such majesty, such silence, such smiling - warm hearted people. Leaving now for Sikkim - the little Buddhist kingdom at the east end of this great Himalayan range. Loved your Thanksgiving message. Hope happiness & health for 1971. love (xxx) Morris - love to Wes too.*

In 1969 Helmi wrote to me, "It is good to preserve information." Her words were prophetic because her 1952-53 documentation of the Makah dances and tribal regalia in her sketches and field notes now constitutes a unique record of Makah tribal and cultural history.

*Elma, Washington  
22 May 1960 [excerpt]*

*Dear Wes & John [Uitti] & all -*

*Charlie Swan at Neah Bay (chief) was a Makah from the Nootka tribe of the west coast of Vancouver Is. - he did the wolf dance with wooden wolf mask & button blanket - crawling about on the floor imitating a wolf very realistically - I spent much time at his house sketching his many masks - rattles & etc. - he often had Canadian Nootkas visiting - one old chief wanted to buy me for his wife at a Potlatch! - Charlie Swan worked for the Smithsonian Institution & his picture is in their publications.*

*These Indians too dance all night at the celebration in the summer "Makah Day" - Charlie Swan Jr., recently wrote me that his father passed away in his sleep while they were getting ready to come to Seattle Seafair.*

*Elma, Washington  
31 May 1960 [excerpt]*

*Dear Wes & Zoe [Dusanne] & all -*

*When [fashionable portrait painter] Howard Chandler Christy came to Seattle from N.Y. to paint Dr. McCullough's portrait (he founded the Orthopedic Hospital) I made small figures for him which he gave to the children visiting his studio - his wife (a very beautiful former model) & small daughter Natalie were with him.*

*I used to do nurse-maid work in the summers & paint during the winters - Twice I stayed with the Dr. Cleins (pediatrician) - he had 4 beautiful little children & one summer I spent at "Oaklawn" - Otto Wittwer's estate on Lake Washington - he had one little black-eyed Spanish-looking baby - the mother was from Honduras.*

*On days off I went to China Town sketching & discovered the Gee How-Oak-Chinn [Family] Association or Chinn & Woo [Yuen] - the altar here was very ornamental with much gold & gilt & on it was a portrait with founder of this "family society" - each day before it was placed rice & wine & incense - [Chinese-American painter] Fay Chong said he has not been taken there.*

During the final years of her life many Pacific Northwest institutions vied to have large exhibitions of Helmi Juvonen's work and to acquire her works for their permanent collections: the Frye Art Museum, the Henry Art Gallery and the Nordic Heritage Museum (all in Seattle); the Washington State Capitol Museum and The Evergreen State College (both in Olympia); the Whatcom Museum of History and Art (Bellingham); and the Cheney Cowles Museum (Spokane). Young artists came to Elma to meet her. Filmmakers came to Oakhurst to document her. Art



critics and news reporters wanted to interview her. At the very end of her life Helmi became the most locally famous "unrecognized" artist in the Pacific Northwest. She loved the attention, and she especially enjoyed meeting so many new friends and visiting with the numerous old friends who came often and took her for outings in the country.

In 1982 Helmi's close friend, teacher and writer Brent Goeres, who lived only a few miles away from Oakhurst, brought Helmi to the Burke Museum of Natural History & Culture for a reception, to meet many of her old and new friends, and to see an exhibition of her work. As Brent was driving Helmi back to Elma and she was worrying that her kitties were wondering where she was and where their dinner was, Helmi turned to Brent and said, "I may be an old lady now, but I've never had so much fun in my life!"

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*Wes Wehr was a long-time friend and correspondent of Helmi Juvonen's. His memoir, The Eighth Lively Art, (University of Washington Press) is due out this summer. He is also working on a biography of Helmi and welcomes any additional information readers may have: [wwehr@u.washington.edu](mailto:wwehr@u.washington.edu).*

**AUTHOR'S NOTE**

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