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Book Review: *The Complete Poems of Helen West Heller*, arranged and annotated by Larry Stanfel

I've seen only one Helen West Heller woodcut. The piece hung in a temporary exhibition at the Birger Sandzen Memorial Gallery on the campus of Bethany College in Lindsborg, Kansas. "Prairie Child," a 1925 woodcut printed in brown and black, stood out for its vibrant movement, bold graphic quality, and its expert use of space.

When I learned that Larry Stanfel was putting together two books about Heller's life and art, and that she was not only a printmaker and painter, but also a poet and political radical, I was hooked. While studying literature, art history, and women's studies in the 1970s, I realized that much work lay ahead in recovering the forgotten or underestimated artistic work of women. I imagined being one of those who would stumble upon a novel or book of poems in a dark corner of a library or find a framed picture at the back of a rummage sale so compelling I had to go on the hunt for its maker.

In *The Complete Poetry of Helen West Heller*, Stanfel has achieved what I only dreamed of doing. Its strength is in Stanfel's pairing of Heller's 112 published poems with drawings, paintings, and prints from throughout her artistic education and career. Heller's poems, most written on deadline for a weekly newspaper column, are uneven in quality but provide moments of clear metaphor and sound that please a reader's ear and eye. Each poem is accompanied by information on its original publication along with notes that comment on the poem and on why Stanfel selected the visual work to accompany it. The poems are presented in chronological order so the reader gets more than a cursory feel for the artist's life through the layers of poem, art, and commentary. As a whole, *The Complete Poetry* adds essential information to the biography of this early 20th-century woman artist. It is important because of the attention it brings to the history of women's creative work in America.

Heller was born in 1872 and died in 1955, dates that enclose crucial artistic, cultural, and political movements of which she was a part. Heller's poems indicate she was aware of at least two poetic streams: traditional Japanese poetry and its links to early 20th century Imagism. Heller called her poems "tanka," one of the oldest Japanese forms that have come down to us as a five-line poem with a prescribed syllable count (5/7/5/7/7) and, between the third and fourth lines, a turn that moves from the examination of an initial image to a personal response. Heller's tanka sometimes reverse this order or are longer than five lines. She is not a stickler for syllable counts, but her most successful poems make subtle use of the form as she builds images with her powerful painter's eye.

Between April 1925 and March 1927, Heller published a weekly poem (for which she was not paid) in the *Chicago Evening Post*. This collection reveals that Heller consistently produced her best work in the summer of 1925 through the winter of 1926. In the poems of these months, she masters metaphor, sound, line breaks, and subjects to create many satisfying and fresh works like this one, published in October 1926:

Autumn In A Park

Garden blooms fade rusty
Under rattling grape-grown hedges.
By salutary decree
I may not pick mauve asters I have mown
In my own meadow.

The placement of those seven R sounds in the first three lines give way to the four M sounds in the last two, playing with the tanka's traditional 3-line/2-line prescription by placing a period after "hedges," and thus melding the initial image with the personal response through sound. In its turn from autumn flowers to her personal response, the poem contrasts the controlled and monitored urban park with her Midwestern experience of mowing wildflowers in the rural Illinois meadow of her youth.

A small Japanese-print-influenced woodcut of a bird sitting on a branch singing beside a cataract is paired with a lovely January 1926 poem in which Heller positions herself as a participant in literary as well as visual worlds:

Shop Talk

The vowel is the word,
The vertebra of the word.
A sequence of vowels
Is the spinal column
Of a phrase . . . Birds
Singing over waterfalls.

Her poems that describe either specific artworks or characteristics of individual artists are among her most skillful writing. Her first newspaper poem, dated 1925, was written about Lindsborg artist Birger Sandzen's lithographs. The poem's sparseness of visual and auditory image captures the American impressionist's work, repeating "Light" twice in the last two lines:

Sandzen Lithographs

Pines and horses turn
From the wind. Birches wink
In the sun. Viking rocks
Fling faces to the sky. Light
Light! Shouts to the very clouds.

Heller's artistic inspirations in other poems include the famous such as Van Gogh, Maurice Utrillo, Odilon Redon, Marc Chagall, and John Marin, and the less renowned

like Frances Foy, a Chicago painter who was her friend. As a reader, I was always happy to turn the page and find one of her artist poems waiting for me there.

Another frequent subject of Heller's poems is the business of the art world, sometimes layered with sexual politics ("The Average Man/Wants his women and/His art without wit"), and sometimes with sharp observations such as this comment on a group selecting work for an exhibition titled "The Jury" ("We wouldn't call it/A landscape for we're not sure/About the trees [. . .]/We fear/It's what they call a Work/of Art. Quick! Face it/To the wall!"). Poems like these, along with Stanfel's biographical notes, disclose the tensions Heller navigated in her struggle to survive as an artist and a woman.

Stanfel's pairings of images with poems are often sensitive and illuminating, as in his selection of a virtuosic, highly patterned fairy-tale-themed woodcut titled "Flight" from 1948 with a poem about the sculptor Ivan Mestrovic which is rich with images of figures and landscape. His helpful notes (separated from the poems and illustrations in a section at the back) provide information on process, Heller's life situation at the time, and in one important case, a revised version of the poem, highlighting the historic, biographical, and artistic usefulness of this book. I enjoy Stanfel's readings of her art for their humor and his individual viewer's vision, as when he writes about an ink drawing showing automobiles in the distance behind a pond next to dark trees: "they . . . suggest a crime scene illuminated by headlights or muzzle blasts, and wouldn't the pond be a convenient repository for an unwanted body? Too, the trees guarding it have a definitely conspiratorial look and bear watching."

As a writer, Helen West Heller was no H.D. – the brilliant and prolific avant-garde Imagist poet writing during similar years. Stanfel, who has also written a full-length biography of the artist, calls Heller "one of the world's foremost woodcut and wood engraving artists," but does not make a claim for her poems. However, Stanfel's care with the research, selection of accompanying images, and notes make *The Complete Poems* an experience of discovering and coming to understand at least part of the creative life of a lost foremother. We learn from the evidence of her own hand that Heller could have used the 500 a year and room of one's own that Virginia Woolf, another of her contemporaries, was advocating during the same years Heller was living by her art and wits in a series of shabby city apartments. I am grateful for this book filled with a close-up view of Heller's sensibilities in poetry and art. Some of the poems have not aged well, and some of the images, gathered from private and public collections, are in need of higher quality photo reproduction, but together, poems, visual art, and author's notes construct a portrait of a creator who lived and made work by her own lights. Heller's body of work, tracked down and compiled by Stanfel, is well worth adding to our artistic inheritance.