

Zama Vanessa Helder (1904–1968) was one of the Northwest's leading artists in the first half of the 20th century with a unique personal style. She specialized in watercolor, creating works that combined technical precision with expressive fluency and an affinity for clear color and strong light. Helder's favorite subjects were landscapes, though she also painted town- and cityscapes as well as some portraits and other figural works. Her choice of the medium coincided with a growing interest in the artistic possibilities of watercolor among modern artists, which contributed in part to her success in achieving a national reputation for her work.

Born in Lynden, Washington and raised in Bellingham, Helder moved to Seattle around 1927 to attend the University of Washington. She quickly became a prominent member of the regional art scene, exhibiting in all of the local venues and joining organizations such as the Women Painters of Washington and later, the Northwest Watercolor Society.

In 1934, she won a scholarship to attend the Art Students League of New York where her work immediately caught the attention of New York galleries and critics. On her return to Seattle, Helder began working for the Federal Art Project under the Works Progress Administration and in 1939 she was selected to teach at the Spokane Art Center. She moved to Los Angeles in 1943 where she became an instrumental member of the California Watercolor Society and continued to exhibit regionally and nationally.

Helder had a long and successful exhibition history. She first gained national attention in 1936 after her work was accepted in the American Watercolor Society's exhibition. She was honored with solo exhibitions at the Seattle Art Museum in 1939 and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1945. She also exhibited at a number of prestigious national venues throughout her career including the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City among many others.

This exhibition and accompanying catalogue are the first major survey of this under-recognized artist's career and the latest in Tacoma Art Museum's *Northwest Perspective Series* that celebrates the work of regional artists. Though Helder is known to scholars of American art as one of the Northwest's most interesting early modernists, we are pleased to bring her work to greater attention and a broader audience.

*Austere Beauty: The Art of Z. Vanessa Helder* was organized by Tacoma Art Museum and co-curated by Margaret Bullock and David Martin.