

Adaline Kent and Her Two Ladies

by Fran Cappelletti, Ross Historical Society/Jose Moya del Pino Library

From a prominent family, Adaline Kent had all the support an artist could want. The daughter of William and Elizabeth Thacher Kent, she grew up with education, wealth and freedom. Her formal training with Ralph Stackpole at the San Francisco Art Institute and Antoine Bourdelle in Paris prepared her for a career in sculpture. Her many works in the 1930s earned critical acclaim. Born in 1900, she was witness to the art movements of the early 20th century and she was an active participant in the San Francisco Art scene. This is the story of her two sculptures in the Memory Garden next to the Jose Moya del Pino Library on the grounds of the Marin Art and Garden Center.

The first, known to many here as *Reclining Lady*, is the longest lasting art installation at the Marin Art and Garden Center, residing in the Memory Garden since 1947. You will find it in the back of the Memory Garden. Nancy Kent Danielson, niece of Adaline Kent and Marin Garden Club Historian, recalled the story of her origin:

In the upper garden is a sculpture of a reclining girl. Early-on the MAGC Board asked the S.F. Society of Artists for art work for the new center. One was donated by Adaline Kent Howard. Some of the center's personnel did NOT approve of a nude so she was hidden in the memory garden.¹



If such personnel did cause *Reclining Lady* to be hidden, it apparently failed as the sculpture was featured in the promotional artwork for the Art and Garden Show, appearing in the Program for 1947 and in the 1948 San Francisco Chronicle, with a bit of artistic license thrown in.²

Marin Art and Garden Fair Program, 1947.

Her debut was positively announced in the Show Program by the Marin Garden Club:

The club's newest project is the garden at the Center. One corner of the grounds is being developed as a permanent memory garden. The garden has been designed by one of the members, Mrs. Helen Van Pelt, and is being executed under her supervision by Mrs. Thomas Scott Brooke and Mrs. John S. Selfridge. The lovely figure, *The River*, used in the garden is the gift to the club of the Sculptor, Adaline Kent.³

¹ Danielson, Nancy Kent, Marin Garden Club Annual Report of Historian, June 2, 1992.

² Marin Art and Garden Show Program, 1947, 2, available at Ross Historical Society/Jose Moya del Pino Library and Cameron, W.R., "Cultural Carnival", San Francisco Chronicle, June 6, 1948, 6L.

³ Marin Art and Garden Show Program, 16.

The Marin Garden Club, first in the County and an original member of the Center, was founded in 1931 to promote interest in gardens and gardening by engaging in educational activities that encourage the conservation of the natural beauties of Marin County. Their support, Adaline's reputation in local art circles and her close relationships to founding Center members make it likely the sculpture was welcome, despite her lack of clothing.



Reclining Lady. Gary Scales photo.

The reason for the name changes from *The River* to *Reclining Lady* or *Reclining Woman* is not documented, but the names appear interchangeably in various articles and publications over the years. In the 1937 publication, *California Art Research*, Volume 17, you can read the biographies of Kent, Jane Berlandina and the Howard brothers. In Kent's story, note the description of *The River*:

Impersonality and repose are two of Adaline Kent's greatest aims, despite her love for what Bourdelle called "petit pain," and these she achieves by delicate and sympathetic modeling of large solid masses. The theory of opposing planes, to which Bourdelle introduced her, and in which she is predominantly interested, has probably long been a basic sculptural tenet. It is a simple device which consists of the slight shifting of two or more plane surfaces, so that static geometrical figures become dynamic and, in cross-section, show multiple surfaces along which the eye travels in natural progression. Thus, in a reclining figure (like "The River" an almost life-size nude in cement, executed for Jane Berlandina in 1937) the head, slightly turned, forms an opposing plane to the shoulders, the shoulders to the relaxed hips, the hips to the half-drawn knees.⁴

The sculpture executed for Jane Berlandina likely remains in the backyard of her former home at 2944 Jackson Street in San Francisco.⁵ Our sculpture, it seems, is at least a twin.

⁴ Hailey, Gene, *California Art Research Project*, Volume XVII, (Works Progress Administration, 1937) 102.

⁵ Moss, Stacey, *The Howards: First Family of Bay Area Modernism* (Oakland Museum, 1988) 47.

The second lady in the garden is known by the simple and descriptive title *Standing Lady*. She did not arrive at the Center until 1982. Nancy Kent Danielson, niece of Adaline, noted her importance:

This statue (standing woman) we call simply “The Lady”. My sister and I had her placed here to enlarge the circle of memory, in this case for another early M.G.C. president, our mother Anne Thompson Kent who felt at HOME working in the Jose Moya del Pino Library and in the memory garden.

All my life I had heard this statue (“The Lady”) nicknamed “Phoebe” and two years ago I met the daughter-in-law of Phoebe McClatchy (wife of the newspaper publisher). Phoebe had been a friend of my father’s at Lake Tahoe in the early 1900s and I suspected that his little sister Adaline had met Phoebe in the 1920s and Phoebe’s statuesque face and figure and hair style lingered on in the artist’s memory. So we arranged to bring Phoebe, now age 98 years, to see the statue. The likeness is astonishing though it is 70 years later (Phoebe says she never sat for it to be sculpted).⁶



Standing Lady. Gary Scales photo.

Standing Lady was exhibited in 1937 at an event for the Forest Hill Garden Club in San Francisco. It was part of a show combining floral design and sculpture. Kent participated in the show with fellow sculptors Ralph Stackpole, Ruth Cravath, Ida Degen and others.⁷ As with *Reclining Lady*, it is unknown if the original is in the Memory Garden or if it is a sibling.

Adaline Kent also worked on the San Francisco Stock Exchange project in 1930 and received critical acclaim for her figures in the Court of Pacifica at the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition on Treasure Island. She and fellow artists were assigned the theme of recognizing the cultures of countries of the Pacific.⁸



Pacific Unity sculptures, 1938, Treasure Island Museum, San Francisco. Author photos, 2018.

⁶ Danielson, Nancy Kent, Marin Garden Club Annual Report of Historian, June 2, 1992.

⁷ Estcourt, Zilfa, San Francisco Chronicle, “Annual Tulip Tea Held By Forest Hills Garden Club”, April 19, 1937, 16.

⁸ Neuhaus, Eugen, *The Art of Treasure Island* (University of California Press, 1939) 56-60.

Despite receiving critical acclaim for her traditional work in the 1930s, she radically changed her style from the figurative to the abstract. In a biography consisting of her personal notebook entries published after her death, she noted:

For the first fifteen years, with a few exceptions, I worked with the idea of the generalized, the essentially dignified appearance of, usually, the human body. It seemed that the pieces came alive as sculpture only when there was an awkwardness or an uninvited bit of personal interpretation. With the requirements of the San Francisco Exposition work, large scale semi-nude figures representing this or that, came the realization that this kind of stuff was a hangover from another age.⁹

In 1943, her *Monument For Heroes* model of a slide inspiring an experience of curves, movement and perspective was an early work in that transition.¹⁰ This continued with many sculptures, including *Presence*, 1947, and *Figment*, 1953, both on exhibit at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. She also sculpted the centerpiece for the famous Donnell Pool in Sonoma County. It is a sculpture full of curves and spaces. As Lawrence Halprin recalled, this was added as a piece that swimmers were encouraged to physically engage with.¹¹

She continued to innovate in abstract sculpture with new materials and inspiration from visits to exotic places around the world. Tragically, Adaline died in an automobile accident in 1957. Left behind were a large family, many friends and fellow artists to reflect on her long, yet unfinished career. Her two sculptures in the Memory Garden represent an important period in her early career. Much more than simple statues, they represent a deeply personal and emotional connection to her family and friends from long ago. They could not have a better home than the Memory Garden.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Nancy Kent Danielson, who passed away in April of 2019. In addition to being a source for this story, she was a long-standing, supportive member of the Ross Historical Society/Jose Moya del Pino Library. From working with her mother, Anne T. Kent, in the Octagon House to the many books she

⁹ Kent, Adaline Dutton, *Autobiography from the Notebooks and Sculpture of Adaline Kent* (Houston, Texas: The Gulf Printing Co., 1958) 16.

¹⁰ Kent, *Autobiography*, 20-21.

¹¹ Lawrence Halprin Projects, "Donnell Garden as Modern.", The Cultural Landscape Foundation, Accessed May 13, 2019, <https://tclf.org/sites/default/files/microsites/halprinlegacy/donnell-pool.html>.

donated, to her interest in our events, we owe much to her. Even more important was her enthusiastic willingness to take a phone call now and then to talk about history and to reminisce about her much-loved aunt and artist.