

# *Pilgrims of the Palette*

## *The Artistic Legacy of Olin Herman Travis*

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Acclaimed as heralding images of the early twentieth century genre, Texas Regionalism, the paintings of my grandfather, Olin Herman Travis (1888-1975) hug the walls of private collections, galleries, and museums across the country. With my grandmother, he co-founded the Dallas Art Institute in 1924, an institution which mentored leading artists of the region for nearly twenty years. In 1933, the public scandal surrounding his divorce from my grandmother led to his estrangement from our family, and to a generational grief poignantly informing our family narrative. This isolation, which echoes throughout his public legacy, not only abandoned his memory to the dispassionate voice of reference biographies and archive folders but also left his paintings to be defined solely by their provenance.

Yet, Olin Travis was more than the experience through which he was lost. This reflective journey and visitation welcomes the sketchy fragments of public memory as the form over which to drape a new and vibrant narrative. Within this work, Olin's images and personal writings enter a long-denied contemplative forum through which our separate yet shared personal experiences and insights dialogue with the deepest expressions of psyche and soul. Amplified by culture, politics, economics, and mathematics, and as well as spiritual and literary imagery, the dialogue elicits a family myth with the breadth of epic and archetype.

Olin's unpublished "how to" manuscript, *Portrait Painting as an Art*, provides a voice of technical instruction which easily shifts to metaphor, allowing the artist a voice and commentary within this "portrait." Even as the artist becomes the sitter, the author becomes artist under the tutelage of Olin's creative works. The process of this journey and visitation reclaims Olin Travis into the fold of his family, and offers greater dimension for public memory.

### *Chapter 1: The Lingering Scent of Turpentine*

*"I know my grandfather as a faint sketch, a light scratch of pen and ink peeping from a water-colored blur. He appears only fleetingly, emerging from among scraps of bitter, half-remembered anecdotes and dusty paintings tucked away in closet-tops and moldering basement shelves. The vibrancy of his artistic career and life experience occurred during the post-Depression era, long before my birth. The public unfolding of his divorce from my grandmother left him painfully and scandalously estranged, even during that tiny window of my youth when time so teasingly allowed our paths to cross. For many years, I've felt compelled to pull his tales and canvases from storage and to search for clues to the elusive soul of this man long-lost to our family through time and circumstance. Both in time and in spirit, we have missed one another."*



### *Chapter 2: There, Among Brittle Clippings and Melted Wax*

*"Without my own memories, I am a public consumer, one among millions who can do little more than say grace, Google for Olin, and gratefully accept what the server sets before me. There's no depth to the screen—only a surface reflecting my own faint image. I'm his granddaughter, but for now, my claim feels false, made from a distance*

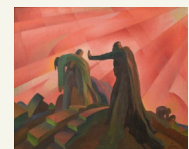
*that keeps us strangers. I face my Sitter with fear that my own image and imaginings will be all that I see, that I'll return with false knowing, or worse, that this version of Olin, this stranger, may be all that I find. I root and scavenge, impatient to gain ground, not yet understanding the necessity of distance and bones."*



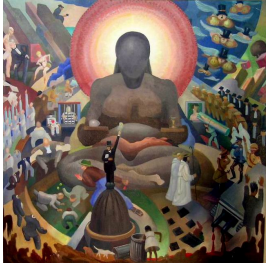
Olin Herman Travis (1888-1975)

*"The pictures are supposed to carry their own message. I would suggest that you take whatever reaction you have to them for what it is worth. They must stand or fall by that. But I do hope that they will be studied with deliberation, as they represent much thought and time and labor."*

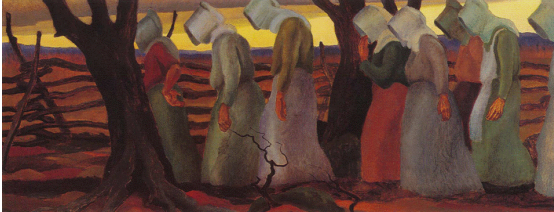
*(Highland Park Gallery brochure, 1929)*



### Chapter 3: The Marks of God



“Just as his canvas received the softly daubing brush, my own paper receives a lightly scratching pen and deepening ink. Independently of will and intent, these marks reflect those left on the psyche by the cry and song of world and God. Our musings and imaginings cannot help but enfold the demons, the blessings, and the surviving and ever-evolving compassion of our times. As we simultaneously record both the conscious and unconscious, the artistic eye distinguishes not only the tones and shadows of philosophies and beliefs, but also the many ways our understandings are nursed, challenged, or assaulted by experience. Inevitably and irrevocably marked by God, we, in turn and in kind, mark our own creations.”



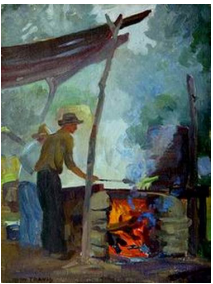
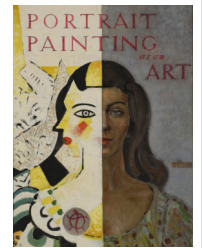
### Chapter 4: Under the Tutelage of the Tortoise

“A creator may summon the earth from void, a painting from a dream, or a child from a twilight kiss. At the center of creativity lies the renowned tension between nature and nurture, both facets weaving throughout the character of the creation.”



### Chapter 5: Rhapsody of the Muse

“I didn’t expect to find love in the bottom of an old box, but once my heart had skipped its beat, there was no turning away from something alive, ninety years beyond its bloom. Troubadours and poets across the globe and into time make arduous quests for what I found quite by accident: my grandparents’ love, preserved in its momentary essence. The love that I found in the bottom of the trunk was in mint condition, shielded from time, untouched by the days when harsh words made their mark and bitterness seeped into their tale. Their story wasn’t really mine to open, and yet, like Pandora, I perceived opportunity as invitation and chose the path of the witness. What I would find was not the worst of humanity, but its finest gift.”



### Chapter 6: Sylvan Hills of Sycamore

“Olin lived in love with Nature. He marveled at teasing lights, brilliant sumac leaves against a dewy log, and languid turquoise pools ringed with frothy jade. He carried his easel and paint-box beyond home and hearth, tempted by wilderness and waterways into peaks and vales of color textured by the senses. The world was his to place against the canvas and brush in pigment creams. Each new day compelled him to capture its fragments with what he called his daubs and smears, and as the scent of mulberry stirred under the valley breeze and fresh air caressed his canvas, he coaxed from his palette the mist and smoke of fire against a cooling air.”

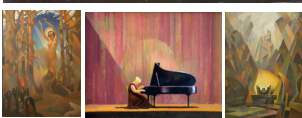
### Chapter 7: Dallas Nine & Counting

“History thrums with the events that enliven our collective endeavors—the fortuitous combinations of vision, talent, and timing that give rise to an era and culture born of dreams. Such fertile ground nourished Olin’s dream of establishing an art institute and invigorated a creative community destined to enrich the heritage of Texas art history. The students, teachers, and patrons of Olin’s art institute flourished as if in a garden, as does any group of people with common interests, location, and a nurturing forum. With the institute as their gathering center, they formed additional societies and collaborations designed to further their creative aspirations. Their destinies intertwined like tendrils of ivy as the influences and dynamics of this colorful cast of characters gave rise to the earliest twentieth century Dallas art community.”



### Chapter 8: Topping the Crippled Easel

“Amid the fertile deepening shadows of the psyche lie the seeds of our greatest lessons. They rest in dormant resolve even as we posture naively under empty shells of rhetoric, delusions of clarity, and verbal masks of unexplored intention. We recline in the empty comfort of our convictions, believing that we are as we describe ourselves. Yet without substantive confirmation of our truest mettle, we roam our lives as mystery to ourselves and others. Only when the demons assigned to our undoing appear in the thunder and lightening of personal challenges do the seeds of our truth begin to grow. Will our integrity hold? Will we emerge disgraced as hypocrite or hailed as hero? What song will be sung of our struggle?”



### Chapter 9: The Gift of Santa Clara

“I knew my grandfather as page knows its watermark, permeating, integral, yet only revealed in the proper light. The fleeting glimpses among the scraps and anecdotes, seemed to deny finding anything so long lost, and for a time I feared that time and circumstance would have their way. Yet, in the end, the walls did talk, spilling their secrets, leading me first through one story, then into my own.”

