

Helen LaFrance, Folk Artist of Rural Kentucky, Dies at 101

Her vibrant “memory paintings,” which drew comparisons to the work of Grandma Moses and other regional artists, brought her renown late in life.



By Penelope Green

Published Dec. 8, 2020 Updated Dec. 11, 2020

Helen LaFrance, a self-taught artist whose vibrant and intimate “memory paintings” of scenes from her childhood in rural Kentucky brought her renown late in life, died on Nov. 22 at a nursing home in Mayfield, Ky. She was 101.

Her death was announced by Wanda Whittemore-Stubblefield, a longtime friend.

In glowing colors and sharp brush strokes, Ms. LaFrance painted church picnics and river baptisms; tobacco barns; backyard gardens with geese and children racing through them; kitchens with bushels of apples and jars of preserves shining like stained-glass windows. Her exuberant scenes of rural life invited comparisons to the work of Grandma Moses, Horace Pippin and other regional painters who drew from their memories to tell stories about a vanished time and place.

“It’s just a way of reliving it all again,” Ms. LaFrance told a television interviewer in 2010. The next year she told another interviewer, “If I do something somebody likes, well, I’m satisfied because somebody liked what I did, but I don’t think it’s important.”

The author Kathy Moses Shelton, who, with the gallerist Bruce Shelton wrote “Helen LaFrance: Folk Art Memories” (2011), called Ms. LaFrance “an American treasure.”



Ms. LaFrance's "Sunday Supper" (1997). For her, painting was a way of reliving a happy childhood. via Bruce Shelton/Shelton Gallery

“She’s a self-taught Black artist who paints her memories of a particular time and place,” Ms. Moses Shelton said in a phone interview. “She grew up under Jim Crow. She was 10 when the Great Depression hit.

“Her art doesn’t reflect the pain of that era,” Ms. Moses Shelton continued. “Instead what comes through is joy, and the values of family and work. Her family owned and farmed their own land when sharecropping was the norm, and they were self-sufficient and lived in dignity. Her blend of personal experience, Black American culture and heritage, and her skill all come into play to make her work unlike anybody else’s. She’s an authentic American voice.”

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Helen LaFrance Orr was born on Nov. 2, 1919, in Graves County, Ky., the second of four daughters. Her parents, James Franklin Orr and Lillie May (Ligon) Orr, known as Bud and Hon, grew tobacco and corn.

Helen did not attend much school. Her parents instructed her in reading and math, and her mother taught her to paint, guiding her hand and helping her mix colors from dandelions, berries and Bluette laundry detergent. She and her sisters worked in the family fields; Helen drew after her chores were done. She recalled loving the smell of the crayons her mother would bring her.

Ms. LaFrance spent most of her life no more than 10 miles from her birthplace. She worked in a tobacco barn and in a hospital as a cook. She made custom whiskey decanters for a local ceramics company and worked as a retoucher in a photography studio. She owned property, commercial spaces and land.

She always painted, but she did not do it full time until the 1980s, when she started selling her work to neighbors and at local art shows and country fairs. She also made wood carvings and quilts. She lived in a double-wide mobile home and used an old school bus, which was parked on her property, as a studio before moving into a house in Mayfield.



Ms. LaFrance painted scenes from the cradle to the grave, including river baptisms and funerals like the one depicted in “Going Home” (1995). via Bruce Shelton/Shelton Gallery

Gus Van Sant Sr., a native of Mayfield and the father of the filmmaker, discovered Ms. LaFrance there in the early 1990s; about a decade earlier, his wife, Betty, had bought him a Helen LaFrance painting of a tobacco barn. The couple looked her up when they moved back to Kentucky.

Mr. Van Sant was taken with her work and grew concerned that she was not getting the value she deserved from the sales of her paintings. He and a friend reached out to folk art galleries and institutions around the country on her behalf and helped her set up a bank account so that she could be paid directly. Mr. Shelton began selling her work and last year made a short documentary film about her life.

In 2011, Ms. LaFrance received Kentucky’s Folk Art Heritage Award. Oprah Winfrey, Bryant Gumbel and the collector Beth Rudin DeWoody have all bought her work, which is in the permanent collections of the Saint Louis Art Museum and the Owensboro Museum of Fine Art in Owensboro, Ky.

Soft-spoken, modest and religious, Ms. LaFrance was not given to long expositions about her life or her motivations. She liked to say, when pressed for details, “Some things should be left alone.”



“Downtown Burning” (1995). via Bruce Shelton/Shelton Gallery

She was married five times: twice to Elvis Lynn (back to back, as Ms. Whittemore-Stubblefield, said) and once each to Lynn Rhybon, Burt McCampbell and A.D. Whittemore, a preacher. All the marriages ended in divorce. She leaves no immediate survivors.

Ms. LaFrance was extremely self-sufficient and not “the soothing homemaker type,” Ms. Whittemore-Stubblefield said. When Ms. LaFrance left her last husband, the preacher, she waited until he had driven to his church on a Sunday, packed up her belongings, and was gone by the time he returned.

She once told an interviewer: “Think twice, say it once. If you think you’re right, know you’re right before you do something. If you don’t know what you’re doing, ask God about it.”

In addition to domestic and rural scenes, Ms. LaFrance made religious paintings of visions inspired by her knowledge of the Bible. That work was both terrifying and ecstatic, and markedly different in technique from her normal output — more

Georgia O'Keeffe than Grandma Moses.

While she was happy to elaborate on much of her work — discussing her painting of an annual church homecoming picnic, for instance, by describing how families would come from all over the country — she kept quiet about her religious work.



In addition to her memory paintings, Ms. LaFrance painted religious scenes like “Angel Casting the Devil Into a Pit for 1,000 Years” (1993), inspired by her knowledge of the Bible.

via Bruce Shelton/Sheltongallery

Mr. Shelton once brought a friend, Eugene Collins, a contractor and businessman from Nashville, to visit her. When he saw her school-bus studio, which she had long complained about — it was as hot as an oven, she said — he promised to return and build her a proper one, in exchange for some of the religious paintings. “Just keep painting,” he told her. He made her a spacious, airy building on a rise on her land.

Ms. LaFrance worked on more than one canvas at a time, a method she developed late in life that allowed her to keep painting instead of waiting for a piece to dry. Mr. Van Sant said she had extended her practice further, onto tiny canvases, as a way

of using up the paint on her brushes.

“They were really terrific,” he said. “I remember one was a kitchen with ornate wallpaper, maybe four by four inches, and Helen said she was selling it to a person she knew. I asked her what she was going to charge.

“When she would ponder something, she would always let out this huge sigh. ‘Ooh,’ she said. Big sigh. ‘I was thinking about \$20.’ I said, ‘Helen, don’t you let her get out of here without at least \$100.’

“Later,” he continued, “I asked her how much she had sold it for, and there was the sigh. ‘Ooh,’ she said. ‘\$99. I couldn’t say \$100.’”

Penelope Green is a feature writer in the Style department. She has been a reporter for the Home section, editor of Styles of The Times, an early iteration of Style, and a story editor at The New York Times Magazine. She lives in Manhattan.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section B, Page 12 of the New York edition with the headline: Helen LaFrance, 101, Who Painted Memories From Her Childhood, Dies