

January 2013

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Recommended Citation

Susan Shillinglaw. "Carol Steinbeck at Work" *Steinbeck Review* (2013): 70-76.

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Carol Steinbeck at Work

Susan Shillinglaw, San Jose State University

In the mid 1930s, Edward F. Ricketts, the marine ecologist who ran a biological supply laboratory on Monterey's Cannery Row, drew around him a coterie of talented, off-kilter artists and writers, John and Carol Steinbeck among them. After a day's work of gathering cephalopods, writing a story, or toiling at odd jobs, the group often gathered to drink Burgermeister beer, unfold shaggy dog stories—John's specialty—and talk endlessly about ideas, often far into the night. One memorable evening, recalled Virginia Scardigli, the lab group debated the differences among the good, the right, and the proper. It's difficult to imagine what this gathering of the middling-good, the incorrigible, and the improper might have said on the subject—other than to poke holes in any exalted notions of good, right, and proper. Debunking made excellent sport, John Steinbeck's métier.

And it was an indissoluble bond between John and his wife Carol, married from 1930 to 1943. During Steinbeck's formative decade as a writer, Carol was John Steinbeck's partner, editor, inspiration, muse. They were a team. Both were bums, rebels, outsiders, satirists, always impoverished, always empathetic with other marginalized souls. As a pair of outcasts, hand in hand they took on the world, John in books about power and powerlessness, and Carol the debunker in jaunty artwork: pen and ink drawings; little clay sculptures—"civic statues"; and brief satiric poems, "feelthy verse." Hers was a winsome gaze.

No doubt, Carol's artistic talents were modest—untutored and undeveloped might be a better description. She saw herself as someone nibbling at self-expression, sometimes serious about her output, usually dismissive or bemused about her creations. She relished the creative process and the satiric thrust of her art. Of her sculptures she told a *New York Post* reporter, they are "my amusement and 'my amazement'—and sometimes I laugh until I'm sick—my very private and personal protest against all artistic poseurs."



FIG. 1 Figurine by Carol Steinbeck, 1950s.
Courtesy of the author.



FIG. 2 Plaster cast of Carol Steinbeck, date unknown, probably 1930s. This and all subsequent images courtesy of the Martha Hasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies.

Cartoonist John Held of the *New Yorker* was an early model (“Girls with long legs, short skirts, spread knees . . . so you could see their underwear,” recalled Carlton Sheffield, who shared his Eagle Rock home near Los Angeles with Carol and John in January 1930, the month of their marriage). At the Sheffield’s, the magazine was read cover to cover each week. Carol’s creative gaze was also shaped by Peter Arno’s cartoons and other caricatures in the magazine. In several pen and ink sketches of their few weeks living at the Sheffield’s, Carol depicts the gaiety of a household packed with three couples and several cats, and invigorated by Sheffield’s home brew. With seven in the household, he upped his brewing to eighteen gallons of beer every five days “and at that could barely keep up with consumption.” John wrote that his own beer drinking induced “a state of lassitude intershot with moments of unreal romance.” Years later he concluded: “As starved and happy a group as ever robbed an orange grove. I can still remember the dinners of hamburger and stolen avocados.”

Carol captured the zaniness of the Eagle Rock sojourn in her sketches. Before she married John, she had been a career woman in San Francisco, working as a secretary and training as a journalist, a jaunty New Woman earning a good salary. Freed from her 9 to 5 job, however, newly married and very happy, Carol frolicked with the three young women of the household (Tal Lovejoy; her sister



FIG. 3 “The Sunbath, or what John Held Jr. found in his Christmas stocking.”

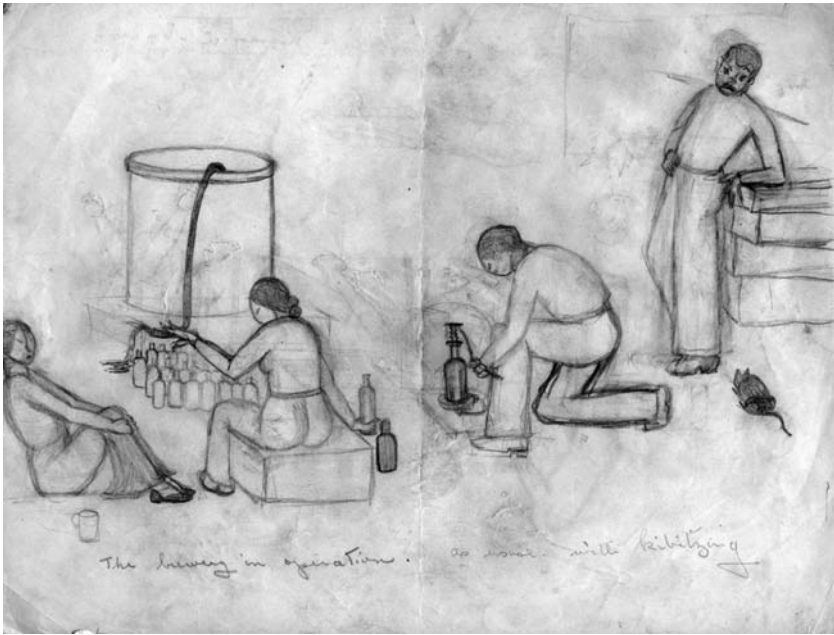


FIG. 4 “The brewery in operation. As usual with kibitzing.”

Nadia, who visited briefly; and Maryon Sheffield) and helped form the “Eagle Rock Self Expression Society.” The Society sunbathed in the nude—there was “some, shall we say, informality at the house,” Sheffield admitted, and added that he was a little worried when his students dropped by. Behind the house and up a hill, the Sun Bath was secluded and surrounded by mattresses, a place so popular that sometimes six or eight people lounged about, all nude, including Agnes DeMille on one occasion. In Carol’s drawing, the sunbathers each grasp a glass of beer—their self-expression unleashed. Whoever emptied the beer pitcher had to fetch refills. The Society often washed bottles, another task Carol captures in a drawing.

The Eagle Rock Self Expression Society “initiated” a new couch by leaping on it—an event Carol gleefully recorded—and sponsored a cross-country scavenger hunt and sometimes went roller skating to the local market. The former San Francisco career girl embraced the freewheeling life, relishing her camaraderie with women whose tastes, intellects, and banter tallied with her own.

And Carol’s humor charmed John. She continued her sketching after the couple returned to Northern California in late summer 1930, pinning her drawings on the bathroom walls of their Pacific Grove cottage (perhaps only



FIG. 5 "The new furniture arrives and is initiated."

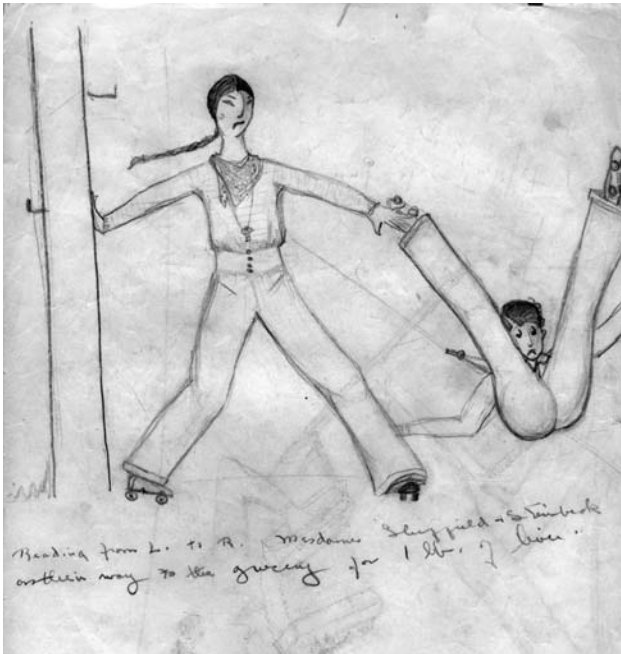


FIG. 6 "Madams Sheffield & Steinbeck on their way to the grocery for 1 lb. of liver."

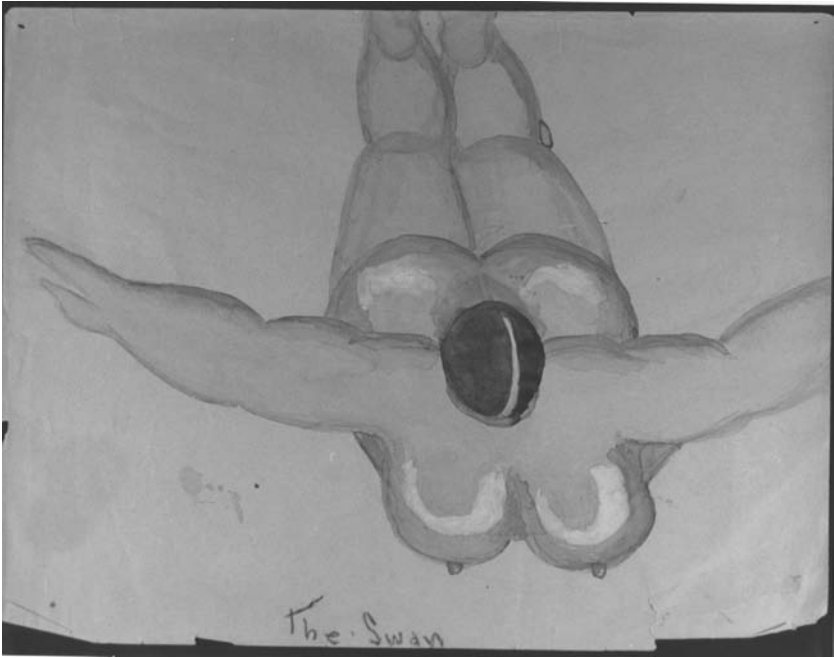


FIG. 7 “The Swan.” A watercolor by Carol Steinbeck, 1930s.

after Olive Steinbeck, John’s mother, stopped visiting the cottage frequently). She began a hilarious series on pink nude sportswomen—one beefy woman per sheet. Women leap from diving boards (“The Swan”), hurl the discus, run footraces (“The Fugitive”). These were extravagant women of action, hardly a cultural ideal. Her art celebrated the oversize female body and the oversized Carol wit.

Later in the decade, Charlie Chaplin became a friend of John and Carol’s, and he loved her fleshy pink women, framing a few of her drawings for his own home. And Pascal Covici, John’s editor from the mid-1930s on, considered publishing a book of her sketches, probably with Chaplin’s promise of financial backing for the text. Clearly her exuberant green-haired sportswomen delighted many.

Throughout the 1930s, the scrappy couple was poor and happy. Like her lilting sketches, Carol, at her best during these lean years, was jolly and sharp-witted, zeroing in on artifice and hypocrisy. John worked doggedly on his fiction, and, taking a break from more serious books, in the early 1930s composed pulp fiction with a “burlesque tone” that he hoped might sell. *Tortilla Flat* was written in the same spirit, a hedge against all the sorrow in his Salinas childhood home when his mother, Olive, lay dying in 1934. An important, sometimes tapped-down, part of Steinbeck’s vision was a vein of the carnivalesque that ran deep in Carol as well.

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