



*The Pink Tree*, 1970, oil on canvas

# HAROLD LANDES

AN EXHIBITION: MARCH 31 - APRIL 30, 1989

KALAMAZOO INSTITUTE OF ARTS



# HAROLD LANDES

Harold Landes is one of those special artists who appear occasionally in every community. They work quietly and with great commitment, but without self-aggrandizement. Their work is admired and respected, but quite often taken for granted. They contribute much to the arts in their communities, but seldom receive either the attention or the recognition their work deserves. This exhibition, arranged in celebration of Harold's 90th year, is a long overdue opportunity to recognize both his art and his contribution to the visual arts in general over a lifetime spent in our community.

Harold was born in Kalamazoo on May 28, 1898, the only son and second child of David Wills Landes and Katherine Marker Landes. Although he exhibited a talent for drawing as a child, it was not until he was a teenager that his interest in art took specific form in his determination to become a cartoonist, a desire he claims was influenced by the work of John McCutcheon of the *Chicago Tribune*. In the 8th grade he enrolled in correspondence classes offered by the Guy H. Lockwood School of Art. Lockwood, who had founded his school in Kalamazoo in 1892, was a family friend and encouraged the young artist. By his junior year, Harold was producing a popular weekly feature in his high school: a large cartoon, usually focusing on some school-related activity or personality, which Harold drew on the blackboard in the school's main hallway.

After graduation from Kalamazoo Central in 1916, Harold enrolled in the Lockwood Art School resident program. He had learned so much in his correspondence classes, however, that after only one month he was recommended for an opening as an apprentice artist at Crescent Engraving Company. It was at Crescent that Harold developed and refined the skills that would eventually be the basis of his successful commercial art business. Except for a three month stint as a member of the Student Army Training Corps in 1918, he remained at Crescent until 1922. He quit the company in a dispute over a \$5 raise, vowing "never to work for anyone but myself again." The 24-year-old rented a room on the fourth floor of the Peck Building, furnished it with odds and ends from the family home, and opened Midwest Studios. His hard work and ability to satisfy clients were such that within months he had to hire a second artist to help in the studio.

Although the young businessman was working hard to develop Midwest Studios, he was not neglecting other aspects of his life, particularly a pretty young woman named Irene Abshire. He had known Irene, a friend of his sister Charlotte, for many years, but not until a double date in 1918, when they each spent the evening with different partners, did they discover their many common interests. After a courtship of six years, they were married on August 20, 1924, at the Little Church Around the Corner in New York City, following Irene's return from a four-week trip to France.

Harold credits Irene with having great esthetic sense and a natural feeling for composition, which in her personal life was expressed in her love of gardening and flower arranging. The young couple shared both their interest in the arts and a great love of nature, and they enjoyed studying flowers and gardens together. They designed and built the house on Springhill Drive that was to be their home for over 50 years, and together they planned the beautiful gardens for which their home is noted.

Harold also read widely in art books and magazines. He describes himself as being "always open to original forms of visual expression," and remembers himself as a high school student arguing with local critics about the merits of Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending the Staircase," the painting which caused so much controversy at the 1913 Armory

Show. Because there were comparatively few opportunities to see original art in Kalamazoo at the time, it was through his reading that Harold first became acquainted with the central issues of Modernism that were being advanced and debated at the time.

He also felt the need to become more involved in painting, both as a respite from the commercial work he did during the day and as a means of self-expression. By 1927 he had joined nine other Kalamazoo painters who were looking for opportunities for further studio training within the community. The Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, incorporated in 1924, still had no permanent home, and at that time offered only classes for children. The Palette and Chisel Club was officially formed in December 1928 as a nonprofit organization "to promote the fine arts and for the mutual and aesthetic benefit of its members through association, theory, and practice." Robert Oliver, a former faculty member of the Chicago Art Institute School, was hired to teach drawing and painting.

In the early years, club meetings were held in the Pythian Building (now Park Building) on South Street. Harold was involved in club activities and served as an officer for most of the years of its existence. The studio instruction offered through the club was open to everyone in the community. The 1929-30 Prospectus describes classes offered four nights a week, with training in design, color theory, drawing and painting. The club also offered a Sunday outdoor class for "serious students of painting."

The Palette and Chisel Club survived the early years of the Depression. In fact, membership and demand for services grew to such a point that the club leased an old sanatorium on Monroe Street near Michigan Avenue in order to have sufficient space for its activities. By 1934, however, the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts was developing a promising studio program of its own. The KIA had established itself on the second floor of the Kauffer House on Rose Street, with Sylvester Jerry, its first full-time Director, teaching studio classes for adults. It was clear to Palette and Chisel Club members that they were duplicating services being offered elsewhere in the community, so they made the decision to disband and lend their support to the KIA.

Harold, together with other club members, began to participate more fully in KIA activities, especially the resident artist workshops and exhibitions which featured area artists. During the 1930s Harold took part in a large number of KIA events, including Kalamazoo Area Show exhibitions in 1935 and 1938. He also recalls the many important lecturers sponsored by the KIA, particularly Diego Rivera who appeared before a packed Civic Auditorium with a large red bandana hanging from his lapel pocket and harangued the audience about the social uses of art. He remembers attending a Judson Smith workshop in 1936 with his left arm in a sling, barely out of the hospital after a five-week battle with blood poisoning. In 1936-37 he served on the KIA Board of Directors.

Harold continued to go out on weekends to paint the landscape in and around Kalamazoo. Many of the watercolors and oils from these years depict scenes from what was called "Little Switzerland," a wooded area of hills and valleys just north of the city. Harold's painting at this time was still firmly based on nature — many of the works he produced remain as documents of scenes that no longer exist. For example, his "View from My Studio Window" records the look of downtown Kalamazoo as it appeared from his Peck Building office in 1935. His 1930 "Self Portrait" also records the face of the still young artist/businessman in a manner that is direct, honest, and technically self-assured.





*RFD America, 1938, watercolor*

The war years brought a dramatic increase in Harold's business, now renamed Landes Studios. He was forced to find more staff and more space for his expanding studio. Over the years Harold employed many artists who were well known in the area, including Jack Berry, Bob Brewer, Andy Valler, Bill Fox and, in later years, Doris Miller, now Director of Elementary Art Education in the Kalamazoo Public Schools. By the late 1940s Harold had leased most of the second floor of the Peck Building and installed a carefully designed and well-equipped studio. At that point and for years following, Landes Studios was the largest commercial art business in the city.

While work occupied much of his time, Harold was still very active in the fine arts and the art community. He kept in touch with current art trends through his reading, through exhibitions that he saw both in Kalamazoo and during his frequent travels with Irene, and through the artists and lecturers he met at the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts. He was always ready when the KIA needed a helping hand. He won first prize in the 1951 Kalamazoo Area Show. He was one of the organizers of the first Bronson Park Clothesline Show sponsored by the KIA in 1952, and a frequent participant afterward. He served on the Board of Directors in 1954 when the KIA made the important decision to stay in downtown Kalamazoo and build its new facility on the present site.

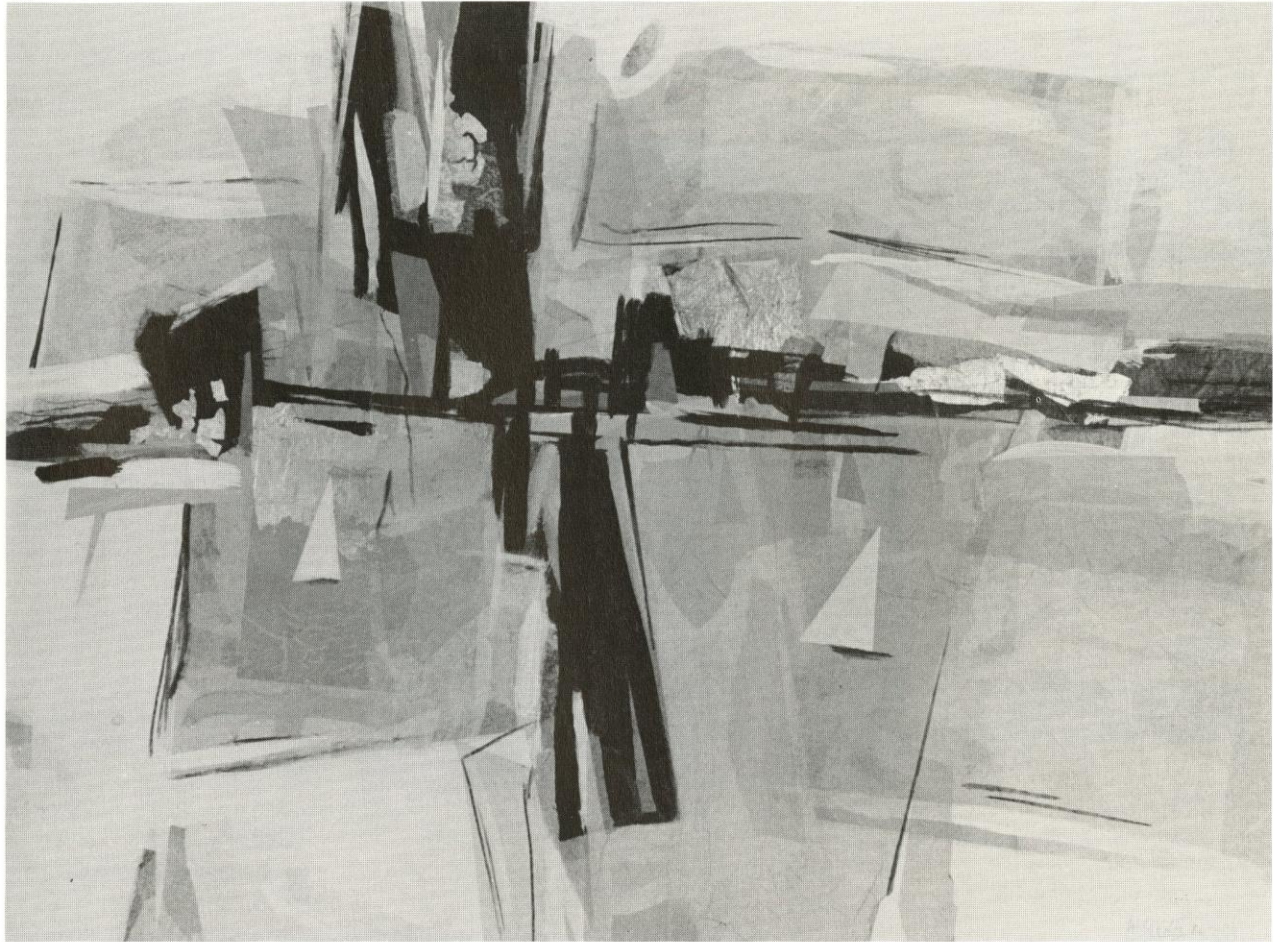
At the same time Harold was struggling to find new expression in his painting. His work in the 1940s was marked by a looser and increasingly painterly handling of form, as well as by a determined departure from local color in favor of

a more subjective palette. However, the experience that truly liberated Harold's vision and introduced him to a new world of experimentation was a workshop by Gerald Kamrowsky during the 1950s. It was Kamrowsky who helped Harold to think of the two-dimensional surface as a space for building form rather than recording it, and it was Kamrowsky who introduced him to a whole range of new media that could be put to use in this effort. Harold jokingly recalls going out to pick up supplies for Kamrowsky, the most important of which was "a small barrel of Elmer's glue."

From this point on there is a noticeable freedom in Harold's work. While he was still drawn to landscape, the observed world became a point of departure. The forms of nature became ever more abstract, and in the 1960s and 70s he broke through to pure nonrepresentational painting. A fine example of the reductionism in Harold's late painting is "The Pink Tree" of 1970. Here the "scene" is still recognizable: two people are walking up a path between tall trees. The trees, however, are reduced to large ovals of green and pink, while the people are rendered as small triangular shapes of red and blue. The whole painting is a joyous exercise in color relationships that emphasizes the essential flatness of the canvas rather than the scene which is depicted.

By the 1960s Harold and Irene felt the need to ease up a bit from the pressure of work at Landes Studios. After 40 years as the driving force of the business, Harold began to take a little time for himself. He and Irene made a number of trips abroad, including a three-month world tour in 1966. The slides and photographs he took during these trips were





*Gold Coast*, 1986, mixed media

increasingly used as resources in his paintings. A number of works in this exhibition were inspired by his foreign travels. Irene's declining health was also a factor in their decision to finally sell the business to two of Harold's employees in 1969.

Retirement not only meant an opportunity to travel, but also the leisure to devote much more time to his painting. Harold's spacious home studio, built in the 1950s to take care of overflow work from his business, was now put to use for his own work. In the 1970s his output increased dramatically, including work that ranges from traditional landscapes, to a wide range of experiments in collage, to some of his best abstractions. One piece that illustrates both Harold's inventiveness and his humor is "Joseph's Coat of Many Colors," now owned by People's Church. This work is constructed entirely from old palette papers, collected by Harold over the years and assembled into the form of a cape, which from a distance has the appearance of multi-colored feathers.

If the 1970s was one of Harold's most productive decades, it came to an end with one of the saddest events of his life: the death of his dear wife in 1979. Theirs had been a life shared in the fullest possible sense, and losing Irene was a staggering experience for Harold. In time, and thanks in large part to his still vital interest in art, he was able to carry

on with his own life. Perhaps another reason for Harold's renewed interest in his work was the community's "rediscovery" of his painting. After years of not exhibiting, Harold had one-person shows at the Shelbyville Art Emporium and at the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts in 1981. Since that time his work has been featured in a number of exhibits in the Kalamazoo area. The current exhibition at the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, however, is the most comprehensive show of Harold's work ever seen in a Michigan museum.

Harold is still painting. This show contains works completed within the last year and, except for a recent illness, would have included a painting he had planned especially for the exhibition. His vitality, zest for life, and desire to make art are surprising and awesome. He has given his entire life to art, and in one way or another, his art has enriched our community and all of the lives it has touched.

Helen Sheridan



# CHRONOLOGY

**1898**

Born May 28, second child of David Wills Landes and Katherine Marker Landes

**1938**

First trip to foreign country: five-week motor tour of Mexico

**1912**

Begins correspondence classes at Lockwood School of Art; continues with Lockwood into 1916

**1916**

Graduates from Kalamazoo Central High School; hired as apprentice artist at Crescent Engraving Company

**1918**

Serves in Student Army Training Corps, September-December

**1922**

Leaves Crescent Engraving; establishes commercial art business, Midwest Studios

**1924**

Marries Irene Abshire in New York City

**1927-28**

Builds house on Springhill Drive

**1928**

Founding member of Palette and Chisel Club

**1931**

Irene joins business as bookkeeper; business renamed Landes Studios

**1934**

Palette and Chisel Club disbands to avoid duplicating classes offered by Kalamazoo Institute of Arts

**1936**

Severe blood poisoning threatens life; attends KIA artist workshop with Judson Smith soon after leaving hospital

**1936-37**

Serves on KIA Board of Directors



*Self Portrait, 1930, oil on canvas*

**1951**

Wins first prize in the Kalamazoo Area Show

**1952**

Helps organize the first Bronson Park Clothesline Show

**1954-55**

Serves on KIA Board of Directors

**1960**

First trip to Europe

**1963**

Two-month tour of Mediterranean, with side trip up the Nile

**1966**

Three-month tour of the world

**1969**

Sells Landes Studios to Jack Berry and William Fox

**1979**

Death of Irene in December

**1981**

One-person exhibitions at Shelbyville Art Emporium and Kalamazoo Institute of Arts

**1985**

Visits South Pacific and New Guinea

**1986**

Takes riverboat tour of Amazon River

**1989**

Major retrospective exhibition, Kalamazoo Institute of Arts