

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet: I Will Not Bend An Inch

February 17, 2024 - July 28, 2024

I am only obeying a command which is stronger than myself, even in the face of what may seem discouraging conditions, I cannot stop, I must go on. Someday people will realize that this is my medium of expression.

–Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, 1927

Best known for her figurative sculptures carved in wood and stone, Nancy Elizabeth Prophet was born in 1890 to parents of Narragansett and African American heritage. She became RISD's first documented graduate of color, completing her degree in 1918. In 1922, seeking new opportunities as a young female Afro-Indigenous artist, she relocated to Paris. During her 12 years there, Prophet created and exhibited sculptures, gaining critical recognition but also struggling with poverty. In 1934 she moved to Atlanta to co-found the art program at Spelman College, returning to Rhode Island in 1944 to pursue her own art. She remained here until her death in 1960.

In recent years, Nancy Elizabeth Prophet's work and personal narrative have been embraced by art historians and artists. Her sculptures are now widely appreciated for their depth of presence, uniquely straddling European classical traditions, modernist influences, and her own experiences as an Afro-Indigenous woman. Her commitment to making her art provides a model of unshakable artistic determination and unwavering personal resistance to racist and sexist expectations. Fiery, elegant, and above all tenacious, she is characterized by a 1929 entry in her diary: "I will not bend an inch."

Throughout her career, Nancy Elizabeth Prophet sought artistic recognition in the form of a solo exhibition of her work. This presentation realizes that vision, assembling the entirety of her existing sculptures and works on paper and providing photographic documentation of sculptures that are lost or were destroyed.

Curated by Sarah Ganz Blythe, deputy director of exhibitions, education, and programs; Dominic Molon, Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art; and Kajette Solomon, social equity and inclusion specialist; with contributions by Maureen C. O'Brien, curator of painting and sculpture; and Gabrielle Walker, Nancy Elizabeth Prophet Curatorial Assistant.

Credits

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Acknowledgments

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet: I Will Not Bend an Inch is organized by the RISD Museum. RISD is built on what is now called College Hill, part of the ancestral homelands of the Narragansett Indian Tribe. Prophet proudly claimed her Narragansett heritage. The amplification of Native voices and histories is crucial to rectifying the many violent legacies of colonialism, and we gratefully acknowledge the ongoing critical contributions of Indigenous people, like Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, across our state, region, and nation.

Our community has generously shared a wealth of stories, projects, and research reflecting years of commitment to documenting and celebrating Prophet's work and life. Sylvia Ann Soares and Ray Rickman helped shape a responsive approach to gathering and learning together. Arthur Bert, Catherine Little Bert, Nancy Whipple Grinnell, Christine McIntyre-Hannon, Mack H. Scott III, Lorén M. Spears, and Francine Weiss have provided invaluable insights and nuanced perspectives that informed and focused the exhibition and publication.

We are grateful to exhibition lenders for their tremendous trust and cooperation: Brooklyn Museum; Howe/Lightbody Family Collection; James P. Adams Library, Special Collections, Rhode Island College; Newport Art Museum; Rhode Island Black Heritage Society; Simone Leigh and Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery; Spelman College Museum of Fine Art; and Whitney Museum of American Art.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

All works by Nancy Elizabeth Prophet unless otherwise noted.

Sculpture

Discontent, 1929

Magnolia wood with stain

RISD Museum, Gift of Miss Eleanor Green and Miss Ellen D. Sharpe

30.019

This sculpture's determined expression, fabric wrapped tightly around the head and neck, may be the very representation of discontent, or dissatisfaction with one's own circumstances. Prophet stated that this piece was "the result of a long emotional experience of restlessness, of gnawing hunger for the way of attainment." This yearning still plagues Black and Indigenous women in a world that systematically oppresses and erases them, making it difficult for them to reach success on their own terms.

–Kajette Solomon, social equity and inclusion specialist



Silence, ca. 1926

Marble

RISD Museum, Gift of Miss Ellen D. Sharpe **30.092**

Silence embodies the endurance that characterized Prophet's interior and artistic life. "I feel so much in contact with myself," she wrote of the sensation of cutting stone. Although this work is not identified as a self-portrait, the subject's forehead, cheekbones, and smooth cap of hair evoke Prophet's appearance.

The marble is pocked and striated, and its bright surface is embedded with veins of green and gray. Color variations and repairs to breakage in the nose and chin contrast with the undisturbed clarity of the almond-shaped eyes. The subject's expression is veiled, as if resisting access to her inner thoughts.

–Maureen C. O'Brien, curator of painting and sculpture



Negro Head, ca. 1924
Maple wood
RISD Museum, Gift of Miss Eleanor B. Green **35.780**

This sculpture's finely carved details suggest that it depicts the artist's husband, Francis Ford. Alternatively, some scholars believe it may be a portrait of American singer Roland Hayes, who was also living in Paris at the time. The directness of the man's gaze, combined with the work's rigid frontality, its large and roughly finished base, and Prophet's choice of title, gives it a more universal quality.

Head of a Negro is a particularly prominent work for Prophet, as it was exhibited at the Salon d'Automne exhibition in Paris in 1924, then purchased by former Rhode Island first lady Eleanor Burgess Green in 1927. It became part of the RISD Museum's collection in 1935.

—Dominic Molon, Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art



Walk Among the Lilies, ca. 1931-1932
Wood with polychromy (colored paint)
RISD Museum, Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund **2023.15**

This idyllic depiction is complicated by the appearance of a menacing face above the woman's head. Prophet created two other known versions of this work, currently considered to be lost or destroyed, that presented the same imagery or replaced the threatening entity with radiating circular forms suggesting sunlight.

The source of this work's title is unknown, but it may be a biblical reference, specifically to Song of Solomon 2:16: "My beloved is mine and I am his; he browses among the lilies." Perhaps the entity in the upper left represents malevolent forces—racism, sexism, hunger, poverty, and a professional artist's skepticism and doubt—that threatened Prophet throughout her life.

—Dominic Molon, Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art



Peace (also referred to as *Facing the Light*), 1928-1931
Polychrome wood
Courtesy Rhode Island Black Heritage Society TL16.2024



This carved and painted relief presents male and female figures in profile and facing opposite directions. Their varying positions—one holds a hand to her ear, while another gestures in supplication or prayer—leave the work's meaning ambiguous, suggesting both spiritual and secular interpretations. This work was included under the name *Peace* in a 1932 Newport Art Association exhibition, and was shown that same year with a number of Prophet's works at the Vose Galleries in Boston.

—Dominic Molon, Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art

Youth (Head in Wood), ca. 1930
Wood
Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn Museum Fund for African American Art in honor of Sandra Williams-Cornwell 2014.3 TL20.2024



A testament to Prophet's dynamic creative process, *Youth (Head in Wood)* highlights her ability to capture the essence of her subject. Interestingly, this sculpture was originally mounted on a separate base, a choice that departs from Prophet's use of textured and chunkier bases. Art historian Kellie Jones has recently suggested that Prophet's medium choice of wood empowered her to "think about and imagine the chroma of dark skin." Revealing varying shades of brown, her bold approach conveys a clear vision of her subject.

—Gabrielle Walker, Nancy Elizabeth Prophet Curatorial Assistant

Congolais, 1931

Cherrywood

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase 32.83

TL21.2024



“I believe it is the first time that this type of African has been brought to the attention of the world of modern times. Am I right? People are seeing the aristocracy of Africa.”

–Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, writing to W. E. B. Du Bois

Congolais depicts a warrior from the Maasai tribe of Kenya and Tanzania in East Africa. The culture is identifiable by the single braid worn only by Maasai men. Prophet named this pan-African work *Congolais* after people from the Republic of the Congo, then occupied by France. She was inspired to sculpt this subject after visiting the Exposition coloniale internationale in Paris in 1931, an exhibition that celebrated and legitimized French colonial enterprise and conquest.

–Dominic Molon, Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art

Mask, ca. 1940s

Terra-cotta with gold or bronze paint

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College **TL108.2023.1**



This is the only known existing mask made by Prophet. In the wall case behind you are photos of other masks that were, like this one, created in the latter part of her career. Their locations are unknown.

Contemporary scholar and artist Kelly Taylor Mitchell writes in this exhibition's catalogue, "To wear the mask, concealing one's Blackness and/or Indigeneity, is an act of self-protection that carries risk. The mask may inundate its wearer, making it harder to disentangle from the systems of violence that compel concealment. In Prophet's untitled masks, which so clearly convey whiteness, the eyes are open (as with most of her sculptures), but they would be nonfunctional for the wearer. This incapacity suggests the . . . failures of masking: its unsustainability, its built-in limitations."

–Kajette Solomon, social equity and inclusion specialist

Silence, ca. 1926

Bronze

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College **TL108.2023.2**



Distinguished by its dark patina and smooth surface, this bronze version of *Silence* appears to have been made from a cast taken from Prophet's marble sculpture. It is prominently signed ELI. PROPHET, a variation of the artist's name that appeared on her listings for the Paris Salon. No foundry marks are present to indicate where the cast was made.

While a student at RISD and later in Paris, Prophet developed a keen appreciation of classical and Renaissance art. Her knowledge is reflected here, evoking ancient Greek sculpture and Leonardo da Vinci's enigmatic *Mona Lisa*.

–Maureen C. O'Brien, curator of painting and sculpture

Head of a Cossack, ca. 1929/1939
Ebonized wood
Howe/Lightbody Family Collection TL161.2023

In this bust, a male figure wears a head covering associated with the predominantly eastern Ukrainian and southern Russian people evoked in the title. It is thought that Prophet may have based this likeness on Turkish president Mustapha Kemul Pasha (1881–1938), who was often featured in the media while she was actively making the work, or perhaps on an individual she observed in public. The Cossacks are often associated with military combat and conquest, which Prophet may have signaled with the dark wood.

–Dominic Molon, Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art



Head in Ebony, 1926-1929, altered later
Ebony
Courtesy of Spelman College Museum of Fine Art TL171.2023.2

Head in Ebony presents a bust whose gender is difficult to determine based on the generalized treatment of the hair and the fact that portions have been chipped away. This alteration might have transpired around 1945, for unknown reasons.

Created during the 1920s in Paris, this piece combines skilled carving with formal and expressive simplicity and directness. It was one of the sculptures Prophet submitted to French salons, helping establish her reputation as a significant presence in the Paris art scene.

Head in Ebony was owned in the 1930s by African American scholar W. E. B. Du Bois, Prophet's staunch supporter and regular correspondent. He wrote of her, "She never submitted to patronage, cringed to the great, or begged of the small. She worked. She is still working."

–Dominic Molon, Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art



Photographs

These photographs represent works of art that have been lost or destroyed. Through purposeful documentation and careful circulation, Prophet used photography to control how her work was seen and who saw it. Given the size and weight of sculptures made of marble, bronze, wood, and plaster, photographic representation was crucial to their life outside the studio and their introduction to the art world.

Prophet may have photographed her own work or directed the documentation, using drapes to hide her studio and carefully cropping out the sculptor's stand supporting the work. She also had her sculptures photographed professionally by Bernès, Marouteau & Cie, a Paris firm that also documented the work of artists Rodin and Picasso.

The backs of several of these photos bear the inscription "For Dad," suggesting that Prophet kept her father apprised of her work, and her letters to W. E. B. Du Bois often included recent photographs of her sculptures. Prophet's notes are included here.

–Sarah Ganz Blythe, deputy director of exhibitions, education, and programs

All sculptures depicted in these photos are by Nancy Elizabeth Prophet. Unless otherwise indicated, she is also assumed to be the photographer. These photographs are all Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections, James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College, unless otherwise stated.

Pilgrim, 1931

Plaster or clay; dimensions and location unknown; photo undated
Bernès, Marouteau & Cie, photographic studio
Paris; active ca. 1920s–ca. 1940s
Gelatin silver print
RISD Museum, Gift of Wayne Howe 2023.29.1



Night, 1926–1932

Clay; dimensions and location unknown; photo undated
Bernès, Marouteau & Cie, photographic studio
Paris; active ca. 1920s–ca. 1940s
Bromoil print [?]
RISD Museum, Gift of Wayne Howe 2023.29.2



Poise, 1928

Medium, dimensions, and location unknown; photo undated

Note: "Statue 10 ft. height, to be executed in marble"

Bernès, Marouteau & Cie, photographic studio

Paris; active ca. 1920s–ca. 1940s

Gelatin silver print

RISD Museum, Gift of Wayne Howe 2023.29.3



Untitled (Head), 1929

Possibly bronze; dimensions and location unknown; photo undated

Bernès, Marouteau & Cie, photographic studio

Paris; active ca. 1920s–ca. 1940s

Gelatin silver print

RISD Museum, Gift of Wayne Howe 2023.29.5



Poverty (later titled *Prayer*), 1926

Plaster; dimensions and location unknown; photo undated

Bernès, Marouteau & Cie, photographic studio

Paris; active ca. 1920s–ca. 1940s

Gelatin silver print

RISD Museum, Gift of Wayne Howe 2023.29.6



Mask, 1958

Plaster; length: 13 1/2 in.; location unknown; photo undated

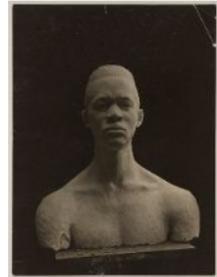
Gelatin silver print

RISD Museum, Gift of Wayne Howe 2023.29.7



Bust, ca. 1923

Plaster; dimensions and location unknown; photo undated
Bernès, Marouteau & Cie, photographic studio
Paris; active ca. 1920s–ca. 1940s
Gelatin silver print
RISD Museum, Gift of Wayne Howe **2023.29.8**



Statue, ca. 1944

Plaster, height: 120 in.; location unknown; photo undated
Note: "Statue / 10 Ft. Height / To be executed in marble"
Bernès, Marouteau & Cie, photographic studio
Paris; active ca. 1920s–ca. 1940s
Gelatin silver print
RISD Museum, Gift of Wayne Howe **2023.29.10**



Head, 1958

Plaster; dimensions and location unknown; photo undated
Gelatin silver print
RISD Museum, Gift of Wayne Howe **2023.29.11**



The Charlatan, ca. 1925

Stone; dimensions and location unknown; photo undated
Note: "For Dad / The Charlatan / cut in stone / N. E. Prophet"
Gelatin silver print
Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College **TL108.2023.13**



Woman in a Hat, 1925–1929

Plaster, height: 23 in.; location unknown; photo undated

Note: "To be executed in wood, 23 in. high"

Gelatin silver print

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College **TL108.2023.14**



Confidence, 1926

Medium, dimensions, and location unknown; photo undated

Note: "Unfinished statue 7 feet high to be cut in stone"

Gelatin silver print

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College **TL108.2023.15**



Walk among the Lilies (first version), 1928–1932

Polychrome wood; dimensions and location unknown; photo undated

Note: "1st / Bas relief in wood / Unfinished / Something pertaining to life"

Gelatin silver print

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College **TL108.2023.16**



Walk among the Lilies (second version; also referred to as *Peace*),
1928–1932

Polychrome wood; dimensions and location unknown; photo undated

Note: "2nd / Unfinished"

Gelatin silver print

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College **TL108.2023.17**



Reptile Woman, 1929

Medium, dimensions, and location unknown; photo undated

Note: "For Dad / The Reptile Woman / N. E. Prophet"

Gelatin silver print

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College **TL108.2023.18**

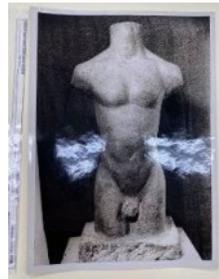


Torso, 1933

Stone, height: 46 in.; destroyed by the artist; photo undated

Gelatin silver print

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College **TL108.2023.19**



Torso, ca. 1944

Plaster, height: 46 in.; location unknown; photo undated

Note: "High 46" to be executed in stone"

Gelatin silver print

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College **TL108.2023.20**



Taille Direct, 1944

Alabaster; height (without base): 15 in.; location unknown; photo undated

Gelatin silver print

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College **TL108.2023.21**



Tête de Fou bookend (upper right) and other works for the commercial market, 1944–1955

Ceramic; dimensions and locations unknown; photo undated

Gelatin silver print

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College **TL108.2023.22**



Patience, ca. 1955

Medium unknown, height (without base): 10 1/2 in.; location unknown;
photo undated

Gelatin silver print

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College **TL108.2023.23**



Mask, ca. 1955

Medium, dimensions, and location unknown; photo undated

Gelatin silver print

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College **TL108.2023.24**



Drawings

Prophet's presence moves resoundingly in her drawings, which share insight into her creative process. Through them, she investigated anatomy and perspective and keenly detailed her subjects, skillfully adding depth with shading, crosshatching, and lighter markings.

–Gabrielle Walker, Nancy Elizabeth Prophet Curatorial Assistant

Drawing, no date

Graphite on paper

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College **TL108.2023.3**



Drawing, no date

Graphite on paper

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College **TL108.2023.4**



Drawing, no date

Graphite on paper

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College **TL108.2023.5**



Drawing, no date

Ink on paper

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College **TL108.2023.6**



Watercolors

Prophet's watercolors capture the vibrancy of her lived experiences. Enhanced with graphite and chalk pastels, these highly experimental works are rich in color and texture, moving rapidly across the paper. Trees appear on every sheet. She paints them to life: resplendent, whirling, and luscious, the material source of her wooden sculptures.

–Gabrielle Walker, Nancy Elizabeth Prophet Curatorial Assistant

Drawing, no date

Graphite, watercolor, and opaque watercolor

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College **TL108.2023.7**



Drawing, no date

Graphite, watercolor, and opaque watercolor

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College **TL108.2023.8**



Drawing, no date

Graphite, watercolor, and opaque watercolor

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College **TL108.2023.9**



Drawing, no date

Graphite, watercolor, and opaque watercolor

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College **TL108.2023.10**



RISD MUSEUM

Drawing, no date

Graphite, watercolor, and opaque watercolor

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College TL108.2023.11



Drawing, no date

Graphite, watercolor, and opaque watercolor

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections,
James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College TL108.2023.12



Untitled, ca. 1937

Graphite, watercolor, and opaque watercolor

Courtesy of Spelman College Museum of Fine Art TL171.2023.1



Other Works

Simone Leigh, American, b. 1967

Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich, American, b. 1987

Conspiracy, 2022

Single-channel video; black and white, sound (24 min.)

Courtesy the artists and Matthew Marks Gallery TL14.2024

In this video, women artists of color and their assistants perform tasks associated with the art-making process. The title, *Conspiracy*, is inspired by the 1974 Jeanne Lee recording of the same name that is featured on the soundtrack.

The film is a collaboration between Simone Leigh—an internationally renowned artist who has prominently championed Nancy Elizabeth Prophet in recent years—and filmmaker Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich, whose films concentrate on the inner worlds of Black women. It is shown here in conjunction with the exhibition *Nancy Elizabeth Prophet: I Will Not Bend an Inch* to provide a contemporary context within which Prophet's work and legacy might be understood. Leigh has identified Prophet as part of a "search for mentors [that] has been confounded by the fact that Black women fail to appear in the historical record or the archive. There's an absence of their knowledge and production. Their intellectual labor is erased due to lack of recognition or understanding."

—Dominic Molon, Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet Diary, 1922-1934

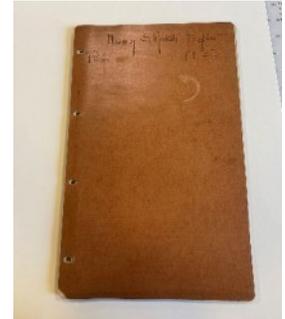
Paper and ink

Brown University Library, Special Collections TL17.2024

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet kept this 46-page diary during the 12 years she lived in Paris. In it, she chronicled her struggle to find adequate accommodations and studio space, her intentions for specific sculptures, her encounters with artists and benefactors, and the challenges and joys of her commitment to her work, whatever the cost.

These entries from the spring of 1929 register her acute poverty and perseverance. She expresses her relief at her husband's return to the United States and the satisfaction of selling her work and having it accepted for exhibition. She includes a reminder: "Let yourself flow out easily."

–Sarah Ganz Blythe, deputy director of exhibitions, education, and programs



Sculpting tools and wooden box owned by Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, ca. 1920s - 1940s

Steel and wood

Courtesy of Howe/Lightbody Family Collection TL149.2023

Displayed here are Nancy Elizabeth Prophet's sculpting gouges, chisels, rasps, and files, grouped by type and size. The files were made by Nicholson File Company, a Providence-based manufacturer. Most of the tools are missing a ferrule, the metal ring at the top of the wood handle, a feature common in manufactured tools. The lack of ferrules, the uneven bevels, and the varying types of wood suggest that Prophet carved many of the tool handles herself. Missing for many years, this box of Prophet's tools was recently discovered in a private collection.



–Kajette Solomon, social equity and inclusion specialist

Hazard Durfee, American, 1915-2003

Portrait of Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, 1932

Graphite, colored pencil, and watercolor on paper

Courtesy of Newport Art Museum Collection, Gift of the Artist,
2000.009.001

TL151.2023



This portrait depicts Prophet in profile with silvered hair, high cheekbones, and caramel-colored skin, looking down in a moment of contemplation. Hazard Durfee's lines are steady and definite, conveying a clear vision of his subject. An aspiring artist at the time this image was painted, Durfee crossed paths with Prophet when she exhibited her work at the Newport Art Museum in 1932. Durfee had Prophet sign his sketch of her—a custom often observed between artists.

—Gabrielle Walker, Nancy Elizabeth Prophet Curatorial Assistant