

Guide to the Mary A. Bell Drawings

JWJ MSS 153



by Beinecke Staff

2015

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Collection Overview

REPOSITORY: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
P. O. Box 208330
New Haven, CT 06520-8330
(203) 432-2977
beinecke.library@yale.edu
<http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/>

CALL NUMBER: JWJ MSS 153

CREATOR: Bell, Mary A., 1873-1941, artist

TITLE: Mary A. Bell Drawings

DATES: [1936-1939]

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: 1 collection (100 drawings : crayon, colored pencil, and graphite on wove tissue paper ; 78 x 52 cm. and smaller)

LANGUAGE: Captions in English.

SUMMARY: A collection of one hundred drawings by the self-taught African American artist Mary A. Bell, featuring glamorously dressed and accessorized women and men engaged in courtship activities, or women centered in domestic or garden settings. Many of the images have religious iconography as well as animals, birds, plants, and children, with houses or other buildings placed distantly in the background. The drawings range in size from 78 x 52 to 51 x 39 cm. and were executed in crayon, colored pencil, and graphite on a lightweight wove tissue or pattern paper. Bell mounted each drawing on a second sheet of lightweight paper that she wrapped around all four edges to create the effect of a frame, then attached small paper tags to the top edges of the frames onto which she inscribed a title, phrase, description, or other caption; some drawings have larger paper tags attached to their versos with poems or lengthier inscriptions. Bell signed a few drawings with her initials "M.B." and included Carl Van Vechten's initials ("Mr. C.V.") in one work titled "Happy thoughts." The drawings are not dated but were made in the years after her retirement and before her hospitalization.

ONLINE FINDING AID: To cite or bookmark this finding aid, please use the following link: <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.bell>

Requesting Instructions

To request items from this collection for use in the Beinecke Library reading room, please use the request links in the HTML version of this finding aid, available at <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.bell>.

To order reproductions from this collection, please send an email with the call number, box number(s), and folder number(s) to beinecke.images@yale.edu.

Key to the container abbreviations used in the PDF finding aid:

b. box
f. folder

Administrative Information

Immediate Source of Acquisition

Gift of Carl Van Vechten.

Conditions Governing Access

The materials are open for research.

Conditions Governing Use

The Mary A. Bell Drawings is the physical property of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Literary rights, including copyright, belong to the authors or their legal heirs and assigns. For further information, consult the appropriate curator.

Preferred Citation

Mary A. Bell, Drawings. James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Processing Information

Collections are processed to a variety of levels, depending on the work necessary to make them usable, their perceived research value, the availability of staff, competing priorities, and whether or not further accruals are expected. The library attempts to provide a basic level of preservation and access for all collections, and does more extensive processing of higher priority collections as time and resources permit.

Mary A. Bell (1873-1941)

Mary A. Bell was born in Washington, DC, on July 2, 1873, the daughter of James F. Bell and Susanna County. A self-taught artist, she worked as a domestic servant for Edward and Adele Dutaud Pierce of Boston from 1914 to 1937. Bell's relationship with Isabel Dutaud Lachaise, wife of sculptor Gaston Lachaise, led to her drawings being seen by the New York writer and photographer Carl Van Vechten and others in his circle; Van Vechten became a major collector of her work. In 1940 Bell entered the Boston State Hospital, a public mental institution, where she died on September 20, 1941.

Biographical sketch taken from *African American National Biography*, s.v. "Bell, Mary A."

Scope and Contents

A collection of one hundred drawings by the self-taught African American artist Mary Bell, most featuring glamorously dressed and accessorized women and men engaged in courtship activities, or women centered in domestic or garden settings. Many of the images have religious iconography as well as animals, birds, plants, and children, with houses or other buildings placed distantly in the background. The drawings range in size from 78 x 52 to 51 x 39 cm. and were executed in crayon, colored pencil, and graphite on a lightweight wove tissue or pattern paper. Bell mounted each drawing on a second sheet of lightweight paper that she wrapped around all four edges to create the effect of a frame, then attached small paper tags to the top edges of the frames onto which she inscribed a title, phrase, description, or other caption; some drawings have larger paper tags attached to their versos bearing poems or lengthier inscriptions.

Bell signed a few drawings with her initials "M.B." and included Carl Van Vechten's initials ("Mr. C.V.") on a hooked rug in one work titled "Happy thoughts." The drawings are not dated but were made in the years after her retirement and before her hospitalization.

Arrangement

Arranged by inventory number.

Collection Contents

Drawings, [1936-1939]

100 Items drawings (stored in 9 boxes)

Title captions transcribed as inscribed by the artist, with her spelling, grammar, capitalization, and punctuation retained.

b. 1 (Oversize), f. ["American mixture of the Ethiopian race."](#)

1

b. 1 (Oversize), f. "The Autumn beauty."

2

b. 1 (Oversize), f. "Admiring the birds."

3

b. 1 (Oversize), f. "Princess of the Forest."

4

b. 1 (Oversize), f. "Fear not, I am with you always."

5

b. 1 (Oversize), f. "Why put off our marriage until spring let us in the fall my dear."

6

b. 1 (Oversize), f. "The girl represent the wicked world, for whom the Angel prays continually."

7

b. 1 (Oversize), f. "Regal."

8

b. 1 (Oversize), f. Untitled [blond woman in garden]

9

b. 1 (Oversize), f. "Gentleness"/"Love in a Garden."

10

b. 1 (Oversize), f. "Lucy Pray."

11

b. 1 (Oversize), f. "He went to the Club and got knocked in the head when he visited his sweet heart; was almost dead..."

12

b. 1 (Oversize), f. "Sweet Violet."

13

b. 1 (Oversize), f. "While taking nature's sun bath in the meadow..."

14

b. 2 (Oversize), f. "Off to war."

15

b. 2 (Oversize), f. "Delicate little mother putting the darlings to bed."

16

b. 2 (Oversize), f. "Piety."

17

b. 2 (Oversize), f. "The jungle Belle Africa."
18

b. 2 (Oversize), f. "Meet me in the Shadows."
19

b. 2 (Oversize), f. "Unhappy."
20

b. 2 (Oversize), f. "Queen of the saddle. Joyful meeting."
21

b. 2 (Oversize), f. "Believe me darling, my words are sincere: oh! I hope so."
22

b. 2 (Oversize), f. "Thinking it over."
23

b. 2 (Oversize), f. "After the ball is over. High kicker."
24

b. 2 (Oversize), f. "Strict attention paid to an English gentleman, by a Cuban lady."
25

b. 2 (Oversize), f. "From sin and destruction Oh! Lord deliver me."
26

b. 2 (Oversize), f. "The sacred heart" [title on verso in pencil, not in Bell's hand]
27

b. 2 (Oversize), f. "The black beauty dancing girl."
28

b. 2 (Oversize), f. "East and West - Love at a distance."
29

b. 3 (Oversize), f. "The young mother."
30

b. 3 (Oversize), f. "The hunter's delight."
31

b. 3 (Oversize), f. "Miss Piety By the Cross I shall live."
32

b. 3 (Oversize), f. "New Orleans. Octoroon beauty and her lover."
33

b. 3 (Oversize), f. "The Desert Fly."
34

b. 3 (Oversize), f. "Good evening Mr. Springer. Miss Sunshine I am delighted to be with you."
35

b. 3 (Oversize), f. "Seeing her lover in a vision, and thinking she may never see him again; it's breaking her little heart."
36

b. 3 (Oversize), f. "The Angel of Joy."
37

b. 3 (Oversize), f. ["The lost Chord."](#)
38

b. 3 (Oversize), f. "Love spat over which dark clouds are hanging; disagreement."
39

b. 3 (Oversize), f. "Through kingdoms and palaces we may roam, be it ever so humble, there is no place like home
40 sweet home."

b. 3 (Oversize), f. "Beautiful Miss Paris."
41

b. 3 (Oversize), f. "Dancing in the lawn. A Lawn Party. Chocolate Cream."
42

b. 3 (Oversize), f. "A run in the forest."
43

b. 4 (Oversize), f. "Oh! there is a home where I once dwell..."
44

b. 4 (Oversize), f. "Lawdie, that gal done gone crazy..."
45

b. 4 (Oversize), f. "Countess and her many seekers full of debts."
46

b. 4 (Oversize), f. "Blue blood lovers."
47

b. 4 (Oversize), f. "Lovely Miss Autumn Queen."
48

b. 4 (Oversize), f. "Sweet Meditation."
49

b. 4 (Oversize), f. "Love's golden dream: Pleading."
50

b. 4 (Oversize), f. "Thoughts of a happy home."
51

b. 4 (Oversize), f. "The water lily."
52

b. 4 (Oversize), f. "The Texas beauty a Creole. Such is the mixed blood of the Ethiopians of the U.S.A."
53

b. 4 (Oversize), f. "Admiration of Ethiopian the Immortal."
54

b. 4 (Oversize), f. "I am sick and tired of this country life. Farmerett."
55

b. 4 (Oversize), f. "Happy thoughts he is coming to see me this evening."
56

b. 4 (Oversize), f. "Meditation."
57

b. 5 (Oversize), f. "The setting sun."
58

b. 5 (Oversize), f. "Miss Regal."
59

b. 5 (Oversize), f. "Discouraged."
60

b. 5 (Oversize), f. "Just married."
61

b. 5 (Oversize), f. "Waiting for the next dance."
62

b. 5 (Oversize), f. "The maiden of the sea."
63

b. 5 (Oversize), f. "Admiring each other's hair on the lawn."
64

b. 5 (Oversize), f. "Happy little Ann jumping rope."
65

b. 5 (Oversize), f. ["Oh! what lovely apples."](#)
66

b. 5 (Oversize), f. "Courtship."
67

b. 5 (Oversize), f. "Romance."
68

b. 5 (Oversize), f. "Pledgeing his love."
69

b. 5 (Oversize), f. "Peace be with thee."
70

b. 5 (Oversize), f. "This life is a puzzle."
71

b. 6 (Oversize), f. "A bride of the clouds."
72

b. 6 (Oversize), f. "Oh! my. I am so happy. he ask me to marry him."
73

b. 6 (Oversize), f. "Nobility."
74

b. 6 (Oversize), f. "An ardent wooer."
75

b. 6 (Oversize), f. "The title of her song is this. will you love me in December as you did in May."
76

b. 6 (Oversize), f. "This ancient princess are having a love conversation with her gallant [war?] lord. look @ the style of her hair."
77

b. 6 (Oversize), f. "The colored saint."
78

b. 6 (Oversize), f. "The forgotten child."
79

b. 6 (Oversize), f. "Beautiful motherhood."
80

b. 7 (Oversize), f. "The voice of Jesus."
81

b. 7 (Oversize), f. "Down by the little babbling brook. Love me darling and the world is yours."
82

b. 7 (Oversize), f. "Sweet Violet."
83

b. 7 (Oversize), f. "Miss Prosperity who are here to look hardship in the face and say I will not have you."
84

b. 7 (Oversize), f. Untitled [Spanish dancer?]
85

b. 7 (Oversize), f. "Mother and daughter"
86

b. 8 (Oversize), f. "[Gratitude.](#)"
87

b. 8 (Oversize), f. "Proposing."
88

b. 8 (Oversize), f. "Teasing."
89

b. 8 (Oversize), f. "Society."
90

b. 8 (Oversize), f. "The Angel of pity."
91

b. 8 (Oversize), f. "Anxiety."
92

b. 9 (Oversize), f. "Uncertain."
93

b. 9 (Oversize), f. "Happy thoughts"
94

b. 9 (Oversize), f. Untitled [woman and man with grand piano]
95

b. 9 (Oversize), f. Untitled [woman and man in garden setting]
95a

b. 6 (Oversize), f. "Burlesque show on the stage."
96

b. 6 (Oversize), f. "Courtship is the finest ship that ever sailed."
97

b. 6 (Oversize), f. "Sleeping."
97a

b. 6 (Oversize), f. Untitled [mermaid]
97b

Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

Subjects

African American artists

Genres / Formats

Drawings (visual works) -- United States --
20th Century

Occupations

African American artists -- United States --
20th Century
Artists -- United States -- 20th Century

Names

Bell, Mary A., 1873-1941
Van Vechten, Carl, 1880-1964