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{ *Our Mothers Before Us* }

Edna Hibel was commissioned in 1995 by the U.S. National Archives Foundation to create a work to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of Women's Suffrage. At that time, Edna had been creating works of art for sixty-eight years, working in oil, watercolor, acrylic, fresco, lithography, serigraphy, porcelain, sculpture, and dolls. *Our Mothers Before Us* was the master work that emerged from Hibel's experienced hand. The 50 x 40-inch painting on canvas using oil glaze, gesso, and gold leaf was completed in three months. Hibel, who usually works on more than one hundred paintings at one time, made this her sole project for seven weeks.

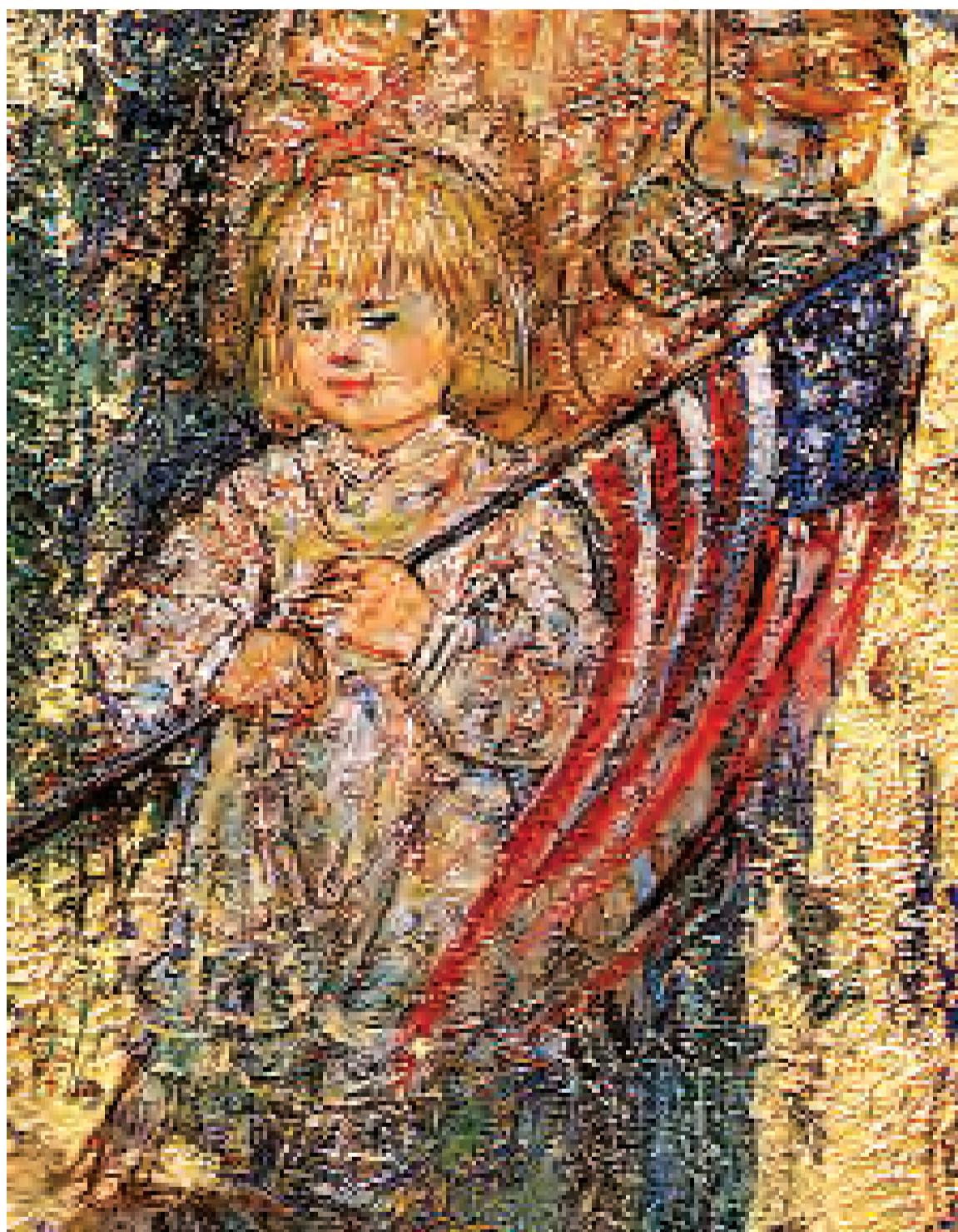


Hibel painting *Our Mothers Before Us*

Edna Hibel's genius appears in most of her work in a spontaneous way. She usually begins a painting or drawing without the aid of previous sketches or photography. However, for commissioned work that requires symbolism, Edna will take a few running starts, so to speak, so she can see how an image might fit into a theme. With *Our Mothers Before Us*, Hibel wanted to reflect the spirit of America and the pursuit of the American dream: liberty, freedom, and compassion. For models on this work Hibel stayed with the familiar. The baby in the painting is Edna at age three being held by her mother with her grandmother in the foreground. This painting is one of only three self-portraits she has ever created. Other female figures depicted in this painting include women's suffrage enthusiasts, the Statue of Liberty, and a child with an American flag.

Here are Edna's thoughts on her historic *Our Mothers Before Us*:

*Opposite:*  
*Our Mothers Before Us*  
Oil Glaze, Gesso, and Gold Leaf on Canvas  
50" x 40"



*Glory Hope*, detail from *Our Mothers Before Us*

“Because of my mother’s attitude, it never dawned on me that women were not the equal of men. It was natural for me to be a liberated woman; I never knew it was something I should have to fight for.

“My mind was flooded with memories of my ancestors as well as my younger years while I worked on this painting. I think of my life as one big painting. I was born in 1917, almost seventy years after the Seneca Falls Women’s Rights Convention of 1848, the first nationally organized forum at which women defined their goals and the ways to achieve equality. For Susan B. Anthony and her collaborators it was an uphill battle that took another three generations to finally win for women the definitive right to vote as spelled out in the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which was ratified in 1920, when I was three.

“But the war had not been won, nor has it been won to this day. I was an exceptional case to have been brought up in such a liberated atmosphere. I can only ascribe it to my mother and her mother before her, who did not take up the banner and march in the streets but lived under the assumption that the war had been won.

“To project my feelings about the women’s movements through the years in a painting, it was only natural for me to recall the images of my grandmother, my mother, and myself at the time the Nineteenth Amendment passed. I have always been moved by the nobility and dignity of my subjects and have felt the radiance of their spirituality. I hope I have captured these characteristics in this triple portrait.

“In addition, I wanted to reflect in this painting the spirit of America and the pursuit of the American dream of liberty, freedom, and

compassion. I cannot imagine a finer symbol of this dream than the Statue of Liberty, in whose radiance of hope we all bask daily and participate in projecting this radiance around the world to all humankind. To me, she is a beacon of all the finer attributes of women engaged in the creation of the future world of beauty—as we all are.

When she introduced Edna at the painting’s unveiling, Lucinda Robb, Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson’s granddaughter, proclaimed Hibel to be “the Heart and Conscience of America.” Luci, a charming, beautiful young lady, acted as a guide during an inner sanctum tour of the National Archives for Edna, who has a passion for museums, members of the Plotkin family, and some members of the Edna Hibel Society the day before the event.

A large crowd gathered on the steps of the National Archives on August 26, 1995, spilling out onto historic Constitution Avenue, which was closed off for the occasion. The ceremony opened with a military brass choir playing nostalgic nineteenth-century tunes, setting the tone for this historic celebration. Cokie Roberts, a noted news analyst, paid tribute to the women of America in celebration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of women’s right to vote.

After the unveiling, the painting went on tour to Massachusetts, New Jersey, Tennessee, and the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library in Texas. Hibel donated money earned from the sale of reproductions of this painting to the U.S. National Archives’ education programs. An art collector in Massachusetts purchased the original painting.

## *Hibel’s Ancestors*

Edna’s paternal grandmother, Rachel, lived in poverty in a Polish village. She married

young, had a son, Abraham Bert Hibel (Edna’s father), born in 1896, and was soon divorced.



*My America*  
Stone Lithograph on Rives Paper  
18" x 20"



Bert proposing to Lena, 1915



Abraham Hibel, age 4 in Poland

She remarried, but shortly thereafter her new husband fled Poland to avoid conscription in the Russian army. At that time, Jewish men who were conscripted by the Russians were subject to brutal treatment or even death. He came to America, leaving his wife and stepson behind, struggling to survive. He found a job and, unknown to him at the time, his employer withheld money from his paycheck so he could ultimately pay for his family's passage on a steamer to Boston.

Abraham, who was eleven at the time of his move to Boston but looked to be eight due to a lack of proper nutrition, was thrilled to be arriving in America. Unfortunately, he was able to attend grammar school for only three months before it was necessary for him to begin working so that he could help out with the family finances. He worked many jobs, of which one was a paper route. He turned all the money over to his parents, who soon produced five girls in quick succession. Abraham, or Bert as he liked to be called, loved hopping on the back of a trolley car and traveling to other towns. He would go to the park and run on the track or play ball. In the summer the city boys would go to the countryside for two weeks, which was like heaven to Bert.

In spite of his difficult childhood, he was a happy, intelligent, optimistic young man who considered himself very lucky. Bert supported his mother, stepfather, and sisters all his life. He was of the Jewish faith but not strict or Orthodox, perhaps due to his memories of his youth in Poland. His memories of the Rabbi visiting the family home and his mother giving the Rabbi plenty to eat while he went hungry were unpleasant ones for Abraham.

Anne Rubin, Edna's maternal grandmother, was born in Kovna, Minsk Gobierna, Lithuania, and at the age of twelve was sent to England to be an apprentice seamstress for a relative. She immigrated to America a few years later, married, and lived in New York, where Lena, Edna's mother, was born. Anne's husband abandoned his family when she was pregnant with their second child. Lena was eight years old at that time and had to go out in the bitter cold to find a doctor to deliver her sibling. Fifteen minutes after the baby was born, Anne was out of bed starting a fire to heat the cold apartment. Life was difficult for the Rubins, who later moved to the south end of Boston and next door to the Hibels.

Lena and Bert became best friends and their friendship grew into love. Bert liked to help out at the Boston Marathon by riding a bike over the course to assist the runners. One year he was the bicycle boy for one of the runners, who finally came in at midnight (the race started at noon). The following year he vowed to support a faster runner, and this time Lena was at the finish line waiting for Bert. While enjoying their picnic lunch after the marathon, Bert proposed to Lena.

Edna is very sentimental about the Boston Marathon. During her childhood, she thought that it was one of the great events in the world. It has become a tradition that all members of the Hibel-Plotkin family who are in Boston at the time of the marathon cheer on the runners.

Lena and Bert were married on October 31, 1914, when she was seventeen and Bert was twenty. It wasn't an easy life for them, but they were happy, and when they found out Lena was pregnant, they were ecstatic.

At the beginning of his marriage to Lena, Bert was working as a furrier, which would become his lifetime profession. One morning soon after Bert left for work, Lena started to have labor pains. Thinking back to her mother, who would not allow the birth of her children to interfere much with her daily schedule, nor



*Nursing Mother*  
Oil on Canvas  
39" x 30"



Lena and Bert's wedding photograph

ask for others to help, Lena set off to the hospital by herself. The day was windy and cold as she made her way to the streetcar stop. She made the painful trip to the hospital standing, clutching the strap of the streetcar, since she was too shy to ask anyone to give her a seat. Lena trudged through the freezing cold the six blocks from the streetcar stop to the hospital.

After admitting her, the doctor

put Lena into a twilight sleep to ease her pain. The approaching baby dominated her groggy thoughts, and she forgot to inform her husband of her whereabouts. Bert worried when Lena failed to show up for their prearranged lunch and she wasn't at home. After making many phone calls, he finally discovered Lena was at the hospital. Edna was born shortly after 6 P.M. January 13, 1917, just prior to Bert's arrival at the hospital. When Bert found Lena and the baby healthy, he was overjoyed and relieved.