



Marguerite Zorach  
American, 1887 - 1968

## *Christmas Mail*

completed 1930, inscribed 1936

oil on canvas

overall: 66 x 107.5 cm (26 x 42 5/16 in.)

framed: 77.2 x 118.4 x 6.7 cm (30 3/8 x 46 5/8 x 2 5/8 in.)

Inscription: lower right: MARGUERITE ZORACH / 1936 [sic]

Collection of the Zorach Children 1974.13.1

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### ENTRY

In 1923 William and Marguerite Zorach purchased a house on Georgetown Island in Maine that became their summer residence for the remainder of their lives.

Inspired by the example of the regionalist painters, Marguerite Zorach began to paint scenes of everyday life in rural Maine during the late 1920s. [1] The subject of this painting is a mail delivery made by a horse-drawn sled to Todd's Groceries in Georgetown; the Zorachs shopped at the store, which also served as the town's post office. The artist also included elements from a similar store in nearby Robinhood, creating a composite of the two places. The clock on the gas pump behind the horses indicates that the time is ten fifteen in the morning. One of the delivery men prepares to unload packages while another figure tends to the horses. During harsh winter conditions, mail was customarily delivered by a horse-drawn sled.

In the left of the composition, the store's door is open, enabling the viewer to observe three people warming themselves in front of a large, old-fashioned potbellied stove, a detail recalling a long lineage of similar scenes in the history of art, from the Limbourg Brothers' February calendar page from the *Très Riches*

*Heures* [fig. 1] to *The Country Store* (1872, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC) by Winslow Homer (American, 1836 - 1910). The forbidding icy-blue sea inlet and snow-covered landscape visible past several barns in the upper-right background contrasts with the warm, inviting interior. Zorach's deceptively naive rendition of the subject was influenced by her familiarity with American folk art. Folk art was an important source of inspiration for many modernists and was promoted by Zorach's friend and dealer Edith Halpert at her Downtown Gallery in New York.

Zorach often represented family members, friends, and acquaintances in her paintings, and most of the figures in *Christmas Mail* have been identified. According to the artist's grandson, the man standing in the center tending to his horse Babe is the store's owner and mailman, Ralph Reynolds; his fox terrier Bonnie sits in the sled. The man seated before the stove is a local widower named Ed Clarey, and the man standing behind him is the artist's son-in-law, Adolph Ipcar. Reynolds's daughter Ruth and her friend Faith Reyher stand at the far left. [2]

The artist painted *Christmas Mail* in 1930 but later dated it 1936, the year before she was commissioned by the Section of Fine Arts, Public Buildings Administration of the Federal Works Agency to paint a mural for the newly constructed post office in Peterborough, New Hampshire. Zorach used the composition of *Christmas Mail* as the basis for the mural, installed in the lobby of the post office at the end of 1937.

The mural commission is well documented. Early in 1937, the superintendent of the Section of Fine Arts, Edward B. Rowan, invited Zorach to submit sketches of her design for the project. [3] In April Zorach sent two pencil sketches of different designs, one an allegorical representation of the arts that alluded to the presence of the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough and the other a close adaptation of *Christmas Mail* titled *The Post in Winter* [fig. 2]. Zorach noted that the latter was "made from the actual occasion in a New England village," and added, "We spent three summers in New Hampshire and have lots of valuable material—beautiful patterns of hills and trees and villages—some of which material I would plan to incorporate in background and color scheme in the actual mural but have merely suggested in the sketches." [4]

Rowan informed Zorach that *Post in Winter* had been accepted because it was considered more appropriate for the post office setting. [5] On April 20, Zorach reported that she had visited the site, discussed some logistical problems about

the mural's placement, and submitted a sketch of the design called *Winter Supplies* [fig. 3]. [6] In this sketch she replaced the three barns that appear in the right background of *Christmas Mail* with a river inlet and a mountainous, snowy landscape and added stylized foliage reminiscent of her early fauve landscapes to the far right, along with two additional figures. On May 1, Zorach was formally commissioned to paint the mural, whose subject was now specified as *New Hampshire Post Office in Winter*. Three weeks later Rowan notified her that the gouache design had been approved and stated that "you may proceed with the full-size cartoon of which we would like to see a photograph." [7]

Zorach reported that she had completed the four-by-nine-foot mural [fig. 4] on September 25, commenting, "It took me much longer than I expected—I should have painted faster!" [8] It was installed above the door to the postmaster's office in Peterborough on November 14. A janitor who was present at the occasion later recollected that some people objected to the painting because they thought the horses' withers were excessively large. [9] Viewers must also have been perplexed that Zorach persisted in inscribing the store's door lintel with the name of the Georgetown, Maine, post office and grocery store, Todd's Groceries. Some locals may have objected to the artist's modernist style, as was later the case with the ill-fated murals that Zorach executed for the post office and courthouse in her hometown of Fresno, California. [10] Criticism also came from an unexpected source. Zorach reported to Rowan, "I heard that Mrs. MacDowell thought the U.S. Gov. had nerve in giving a Peterboro [sic] mural to someone who wasn't a MacDowell Colony addict!" [11] Rowan replied, "Our purpose in inviting you particularly to do this work was prompted by the fact that we wanted an unusual design ably carried out which would meet with the approval of the artists at MacDowell." [12]

Some of Zorach's Maine scenes were included in the Downtown Gallery's *New York and New England* exhibition in 1930, and critics ridiculed their primitive, folk-art quality. When the new Whitney Museum of American Art purchased *Maine Sheriff*, a subject closely related to *Christmas Mail*, some referred to it as a "problem picture" and joked about its ambiguous narrative context. [13] After the artist exhibited a series of similar paintings in her next solo show at the Downtown Gallery in 1934, a critic summarized her artistic status with backhanded praise: "Mrs. Zorach has consistently shown her acceptance of the limitations of her talents. She is not profound and does not attempt to produce important looking paintings. She has humor and a sense of modern anecdote, together with the more

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common ability to capitalize the naive accent.” [14] However, after seeing *Christmas Mail* at the *Directions in American Painting* exhibition at the Carnegie Institute in 1941, the critic Forbes Watson declared it “well designed and refreshing.” [15] In the intervening years, American folk art had gained wide acceptance with the public. *Christmas Mail* can be appreciated as a charming, picturesque, and autobiographical subject, as well as an outstanding example of Zorach’s Maine scenes.

Robert Torchia

July 24, 2024

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## COMPARATIVE FIGURES



**fig. 1** Limbourg Brothers, February calendar page from the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* (MS 65, fol. 2v), c. 1415, gouache on vellum, Musée Condé, Chantilly. Image © RMN-Grand Palais / René-Gabriel Ojéda / Art Resource, NY



**fig. 2** Marguerite Zorach, *The Post in Winter*, 1937, graphite, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, Gift of Dahlov Ipcar and Tessim Zorach, 1968.154.94



**fig. 3** Marguerite Zorach, *Winter Supplies*, 1937, gouache, Courtesy of the Fine Arts Collection, U.S. General Services Administration. Commissioned through the Section of Fine Arts, 1934–1943. Photo by Neil Greentree



**fig. 4** Marguerite Zorach, *New Hampshire Post Office in Winter*, 1937, mural, United States Post Office, Peterborough, New Hampshire. Image courtesy of the Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland. Photo by Jeffrey Nintzel Photography

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## NOTES

- [1] This aspect of the artist's career is discussed in Roberta K. Tarbell, *William and Marguerite Zorach: The Maine Years* (Rockland, ME, 1979).
- [2] Jonathan Zorach to Anne Halpern, April 4 and May 24, 2000, NGA curatorial files.
- [3] Edward B. Rowan to Marguerite Zorach, undated letter, Box 66, Entry no. 133, Peterborough Mural File, Records of the Public Buildings Service, Record Group 121, National Archives, College Park, MD.
- [4] Marguerite Zorach to Edward B. Rowan, unspecified day, April 1937, Box 66, Entry no. 133, Peterborough Mural File, Records of the Public Buildings Service, Record Group 121, National Archives, College Park, MD.
- [5] Edward B. Rowan to Marguerite Zorach, April 14, 1937, Box 66, Entry no. 133, Peterborough Mural File, Records of the Public Buildings Service, Record Group 121, National Archives, College Park, MD.
- [6] Marguerite Zorach to Edward B. Rowan, April 20, 1937, Box 66, Entry no. 133, Peterborough Mural File, Records of the Public Buildings Service, Record Group 121, National Archives, College Park, MD.
- [7] Edward B. Rowan to Marguerite Zorach, May 21, 1937, Box 66, Entry no. 133, Peterborough Mural File, Records of the Public Buildings Service, Record Group 121, National Archives, College Park, MD.
- [8] Marguerite Zorach to Edward B. Rowan, September 25, 1937, Box 66, Entry

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no. 133, Peterborough Mural File, Records of the Public Buildings Service, Record Group 121, National Archives, College Park, MD.

- [9] Fine Arts Inventory, Public Buildings Service, General Services Administration, Building Report No. 280020, June 7, 1972.
- [10] “What, No Justice?,” *Art Digest*, February 15, 1941, 9. According to Charlotte Streifer Rubinstein, the murals were never installed and subsequently lost. Rubinstein, *American Women Artists from Early Indian Times to the Present* (Boston, 1982), 176.
- [11] Marguerite Zorach to Edward B. Rowan, December 15, 1937, Box 66, Entry no. 133, Peterborough Mural File, Records of the Public Buildings Service, Record Group 121, National Archives, College Park, MD.
- [12] Edward B. Rowan to Marguerite Zorach, January 5, 1938, Box 66, Entry no. 133, Peterborough Mural File, Records of the Public Buildings Service, Record Group 121, National Archives, College Park, MD.
- [13] “Whitney Museum Buys a Problem Picture,” *Art Digest*, April 1, 1930, 9.
- [14] “Exhibitions in New York: Marguerite Zorach,” *Art News*, November 3, 1934, 9.
- [15] Forbes Watson, “Directions in American Painting,” *Magazine of Art*, November 1941, 485.

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### TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The plain-weave fabric support was lined without being removed from its original stretcher. The tacking margins are present. The artist coated the commercially prepared pale-gray ground with a beige toning layer that she frequently left exposed through the paint. A linear underdrawing that is visible through the thinly applied paint layer indicates minor adjustments she made to some of the figures and animals. Paint was applied *alla prima* (wet into wet) in no clear sequence. Low impasto is present in the snow and waves, and thin, transparent washes are evident in the horses, sled, and stove. Brushmarking is present throughout. Other than some minor losses, the surface is in good condition. The painting was cleaned in 1970 and coated with a layer of varnish.

Michael Swicklik

July 24, 2024

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## PROVENANCE

The artist [1887-1968]; by inheritance to the Zorach children; gift 1974 to NGA.

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## EXHIBITION HISTORY

1941 Directions in American Painting, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, 1941, no. 108.

1976 Extended loan for use by Secretary Thomas S. Kleppe, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C., 1976-1977.

1985 Extended loan for use by Ambassador Faith Whittlesey, U.S. Embassy residence, Bern, Switzerland, 1985-1988.

1988 Extended loan for use by Ambassador Philip D. Winn, U.S. Embassy residence, Bern, Switzerland, 1988-1990.

1991 Extended loan for use by Ambassador Stapleton Roy, U.S. Embassy residence, Beijing, China, 1991-1995.

1997 Extended loan for use by Charlene Barshefsky, U.S. Trade Representative, Washington, D.C., 1997-2001.

2008 Painting in the United States, Westmoreland Museum of American Art, Greensburg, Pennsylvania, 2008, no. 38, repro.

2009 Extended loan for use by Vice President and Mrs. Joseph Biden, Vice President's House, Washington, D.C., 2009-2015.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 262, repro.

1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 385, repro.

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