

# Daughter pays tribute to Edmonton artist

BY DAWNA FREEMAN, EDMONTONJOURNAL.COM NOVEMBER 29, 2011



Portrait artist Esther Freeman, 68, is visited by her daughter Holly, 42, and granddaughter Kristi-Ann, 14, while participating in the city's annual ArtWalk along Whyte Avenue in 1996.

*Esther Kristine Freeman 1928 — 2011*

Esther Kristine Freeman, an Edmonton portrait artist whose work has hung in boardrooms, living rooms and yachts, has died at the age of 83.

A former member of the Canada West Artists, and past-president of Alberta Society of Artists, Esther took her lifelong passion for drawing into a commissioned portraiture career that spanned more than 20 years.

She was born to Norwegian parents Gunhild and Otto Skaar in Grande Prairie on Oct. 28, 1928, the eldest of four sisters

and five step-siblings. As a child living in the country, she began drawing the animals around her and her talent was recognized and encouraged by her mother and her father. But it wasn't until her grandfather showed her his sketches of people that she decided she wanted to draw the human form.

Growing up in northern Alberta in the middle of the Depression, Esther's family moved wherever her father could find work as a baker. They lived in a leaky two-room shack in Pouce Coupe, B.C. before moving to back to Alberta to Demmitt and Fairview. While there was always food on the Skaar table, her father would give away much of his baking to poorer families.

When scarlet fever hit their homestead in the community near Pouce Coupe, she was quarantined with her father in a small bedroom. During their confinement, six-year-old Esther drew on everything and, when the paper ran out, she drew in the margins of her father's religious books.

Otto passed along his love of music to his children, teaching Esther how to play the guitar and sing. Music filled their home after dinner. He could play the guitar and harmonica, mandolin and auto harp. By the time Esther and her younger sister Gertrude entered grade school in Grande Prairie, they were singing duets at school concerts, in church and on the radio.

Much later in Edmonton, she continued to sing in church choirs. (She sang with her sister in choir groups when they were well into their 60s.) At any family get-together, you would find adults and children gathered around Esther as she strummed her guitar in an impromptu singalong. She never forgot how to play the guitar or the words to songs, even after dementia left gaps in her memory.

Esther's first painted portrait was hung on a wall in her two-room schoolhouse in Peace River when she was in Grade 7. Her art teacher had asked the class to select a subject and she chose to paint a picture of a man from a photograph she saw in the local newspaper. It was Winston Churchill.

During the Second World War, her family moved to the south side of Edmonton, where she attended Grade 8 and 9 at Queen Alexandra School. She received encouragement from her homeroom and art teacher, principal Murray McDonald, who later taught art at the University of Alberta. "This is your field," he told Esther, "and you go to university." She wouldn't get there until she had raised all five children.

Esther left home at 17 and found room and board with a Norwegian family. While working at Marshall Wells, Esther met her future husband and on September 16, 1950, she married Elwyn Clayton Freeman, of Edmonton. After living for a year with his parents to save money, they built their first three-bedroom home in the King Edward neighbourhood.

As a young mother with her first child Holly, she signed up for drawing lessons at the University of Alberta department of extension with her friend Nellie McClung, granddaughter of author and suffragist Nellie McClung. In 1972, she joined the Alberta Society of Artists and continued to take evening courses while raising five children. When her two eldest children were enrolled at the university, Esther registered as a part-time student. Ten years later, she graduated in 1983 with bachelor of fine arts.

When she wasn't educating herself, she was teaching her craft. Between 1978 and 1999 she taught at University of Alberta department of extension, the Alberta Culture Series Program, Federation of Canadian Artists, Lakeland College, Vermillion; Fraser Valley College, Abbotsford; the Red Deer Art Club, and the Rocky Mountain House Art Club.

As a member of Canada West Artists, Esther enjoyed 10 summers from 1977 to 1986 at the Jasper Park Lodge, painting and exhibiting her work with other artists. It was there that she met Chief Smallboy and received his permission

to go to his reserve and paint. Her painting of the chief was hung in the school on the reserve, and one of her portraits of three young boys was reprinted on greeting cards to celebrate the International Year of the Child.

In 1986, she was president of the Alberta Society of Artists. After the Edmonton tornado of 1987, the members held an event to raise money for the victims.

Esther completed more than 50 private commissioned portraits during her career and a dozen paintings for public collection. She held solo exhibitions in Edmonton, Vancouver, Abbotsford, Red Deer and participated in numerous group exhibitions from 1976 to 1997 in Alberta and B.C.

When interviewed in 1998, she said her favourite medium was oils and portraiture was her favourite subject matter. "Satisfaction comes when I feel I have completed it (a portrait) to the best of my ability and can see that it is capturing the soul or essence of the person, which comes through the eyes."

She is survived by her husband of 61 years and her five children. Esther spent the last three years of her life at the Capital Care Centre in Sherwood Park, where caring staff would often remark on her smiling blue eyes, which not only lit up her face but captured the essence of her gentle soul.

Freelance writer Dawna Freeman is Esther Freeman's daughter

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Esther Freeman, self-portrait, 1988.

