

## Langson IMCA presents new exhibition 'The Bruton Sisters: Modernism in the Making'



Helen Bruton, *Woman with Turquoise Bracelet*, 1943, Cut ceramic mosaic tiles and cement, 24 x 29 in. The Buck Collection at UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art, © Bruton Family Archive, courtesy of Barbara Carroll.



**IRVINE, CA.-** [UCI Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art](#) is presenting *The Bruton Sisters: Modernism in the Making*, a new exhibition organized by guest curator Wendy Van Wyck Good. An author, librarian, archivist, and historian, Good is the leading expert on Margaret, Esther, and Helen Bruton—pioneering artists who propelled the advancement of modern art in California. The presentation, which includes related works by several of their contemporaries, reveals the Bruton sisters' innovative use of materials, creative approach to design, and fruitful collaborative process. This is the first group exhibition of the Bruton sisters' work in more than 50 years.

The exhibition is on view February 4 through May 6, 2023 in Langson IMCA's interim museum space at 18881 Von Karman Avenue. It features 18 works from Langson IMCA's permanent collection as well as several loans from private

collections and the Monterey Museum of Art. A trove of archival materials—much of which is on public display for the first time—also reveals how the Bruton sisters integrated art, craft, and design into their everyday lives.

Active from the 1920s through the 1960s, the prolific Brutons embraced a modernist aesthetic that moved toward abstraction and experimented with new techniques and styles. Highly regarded by their contemporaries in the California art scene, the siblings also engaged with prominent luminaries of their generation, including Ansel Adams, Maynard Dixon, Armin Hansen, Frida Kahlo, Henri Matisse, and Diego Rivera. They were also lifelong friends with renowned California photographer Imogen Cunningham whose work captures intimate moments in the sisters' homes and studios, as seen in the exhibition.

Each sister forged a distinctive artistic path by pushing the boundaries of her chosen medium. Margaret (1894-1983) achieved success as a modernist painter and watercolorist but pivoted to creating abstraction in terrazzo in the 1940s. Esther (1896-1992), who originally trained as a commercial artist at the Parsons School of Design in New York, focused on decorative arts. She was also in high demand for murals commissioned for commercial and civic buildings. Initially schooled as a sculptor, Helen (1898-1985) created mosaics for the Works Progress Administration and explored the medium using different styles, methods, and materials for the rest of her career.

While developing their individual practices, the sisters assisted one another with their respective projects. In 1935, for example, Esther designed a series of circus-themed murals for the Cirque Room at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco and executed the work's laborious application of gold leaf with the help of Margaret. One of Esther's most widely acclaimed projects, the murals are still on view at the hotel today. The Brutons also collaborated on large-scale public art commissions, most notably, their monumental mural, *The Peacemakers*, for San Francisco's Golden Gate International Exposition in 1939, which was demolished after the fair closed.

Good said, "These rarely exhibited paintings, prints, mosaics, and terrazzos—displayed alongside works by several of their Californian contemporaries—vibrantly demonstrate the sisters' impact on the development of California Modernism. A culmination of my research resulting in *Sisters in Art*, the first biography of the trio published by West Margin Press last year, *The Bruton Sisters* will tell their stories through the objects they created, their artistic investigations, and aesthetic intersections."

Langson IMCA Museum Director Kim Kanatani said, "We are honored to be working with Wendy Van Wyck Good on this important exhibition of work by three dynamic artists. Thanks to Wendy's extensive research and deep interest in these previously overlooked women artists, we continue to fulfill key aspects of Langson IMCA's mission—to meaningfully engage with our visitors and contribute new scholarship on California Art to the larger community."

The exhibition also features a digitized family album of photographs that follow the Brutons' travels throughout Europe and the western U.S. from 1923 to 1933. The locations they visited inspired many of the works on view, such as Margaret's painting *Virginia City* (ca. 1932), Esther's folding screen *Rabbit Hunt* (1929), and Helen's etching *The Party* (ca. 1925). *The Bruton Sisters: Their Lives and Careers*, an eight-minute film developed for the exhibition, is being shown in the gallery to provide insight into the artists' biographies and site-specific public works.