



Willa Cather

Photo courtesy of Nebraska State Historical Society

**A WOMAN AHEAD OF HER TIME:
WILLA CATHER AND WOMEN'S DOMESTIC ART IN
O PIONEERS! AND *SHADOWS ON THE ROCK***

by
Tricia Currans-Sheehan

In 1980 I visited the gallery in Chicago that housed Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*. At the time it received much acclaim and much disclaim. When I walked into the gallery, I saw three long tables placed in a triangle, set with beautiful hand-stitched tablecloths and place settings of china representing thirty-nine mythic and real women from Bona Dea to Emily Dickinson to Georgia O'Keefe.¹ On the floor of the triangle were porcelain tiles with names of 999 important women; Willa Cather was one of them.² What made this display unusual was that most of the china plates had a hand-painted design of female genital organs, sometimes called "vulva" art, which many critics considered vulgar. Not only was the subject of the art controversial, but also the form itself (painting on china).

The revival of china painting, stitchery, quilting and other domestic arts in the 1960s was hailed as the "new wave of feminist art."³ Rachel Blau DePlessis in *Writing Beyond Ending* states that "the 'fusion of artisanal and high art' has long been a dream of radicals"⁴ and Judy Chicago was considered a radical. Feminist literary critic Elaine Showalter tells the story of Germaine Greer, a radical feminist, walking into a scholarly conference, sitting down, opening her briefcase and taking out her knitting needles. She knitted while she listened to men read their papers. Showalter called it the secret women's language, but besides being a secret language, the act of knitting gave affirmation to other women who created with yarn and it bonded Greer to other domestic artists.⁵

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Perhaps Willa Cather was ahead of her time when she showed her esteem for the domestic arts. Settlers like Alexandra Bergson and Cecile Auclair and their mothers were the real pioneer/artists. For it was in the ordering of their gardens, their homes, their fruit cellars, as well as the land, that they created a place where people wanted to live. In bringing order and ritual, they brought beauty. In 1927, many years after she had begun writing, Cather stated her philosophy on art when she said, "art must spring out of the very stuff that life is made of."⁶

In her fiction, Cather focused on the artistry of everyday use. Many of Willa Cather's female characters acquired their artistic sensibility and training from their mothers and reflected it by ordering and beautifying their fields, their gardens, their interior homes, and by their cooking, baking, and preserving. In fact, throughout Cather's writing life she continually develops this role of domestic artist, starting with Alexandra Bergson in *O Pioneers!* and finishing off with the epitome of domestic artists, Cecile Auclair in *Shadows on the Rock*.

Critic Josephine Donovan asserts that Sarah Orne Jewett's mentorship helped Cather move "toward a re-vision of women's artistic traditions and toward a more feminine conception of artistic practice."⁷ In other words, Jewett helped her see that women's art should be valued and praised. Because of Jewett's advice, Cather dedicated *O Pioneers!* to her.

Mrs. Bergson of *O Pioneers!*, a good example of a domestic artist, did not want to leave the old country (Sweden) to go to Nebraska, but she makes the best of it. "For eleven years she had worthily striven to maintain some semblance of household order amid conditions that make order very difficult."⁸ She insisted on living in a log house, not a sod house, because living in a sod house would be similar to living like a badger in a cave. She was civilized and would live above the ground. She worked hard to maintain the routine or ritual of her old life "to keep the family from disintegrating morally and getting careless in their ways." (OP, 19) Mrs. Bergson felt safe only if she had "bacon in the cave, jars on the shelf, and sheets in the press." (OP, 19) Thus, she made order out of chaos in this primitive land. Mrs. Bergson instilled in Alexandra the value of order, and the comfort and beauty that order brings. "Alexandra often said that if her mother were cast upon a desert island, she would thank God for her deliverance, make a garden and find something to preserve." (OP, 19) Indeed, she preserved not only food but also her culture. Before John Bergson died, he told his sons that Alexandra must not work in the fields anymore. According to her father's wishes, Alexandra was to be the designer and manager of the

farm. She, not the sons, would be the one responsible for shaping the land because her father knew his daughter had the ability to order, design, create.

Alexandra was an artist in her own way. She did not want to subdue the land; she wanted to adapt to it. She had an intuitive sense about the land, just as a mother has an intuitive sense about her children or an artist has an intuitive sense about her/his work. Cather used the words "organic form" to describe the process of how she wrote the novel—from a sense of letting it go and feeling how it should be ordered and shaped.⁹ Alexandra has that intuitive sense also. At the end of the first chapter, Alexandra and Emil return from their trek to the river bottom lands to see if they should sell out and move there. Driving back to the Divide, she felt alive and excited. "That night she had a new consciousness of the country, felt almost a new relation to it...She had never known before how much the country meant to her...she felt the future stirring."(OP, 45) At this point, Alexandra has the instinct of artists who know they are onto creating something great, but they are not sure what. And so she lets her intuitive sense take over.

Alexandra does create order out of chaos. Sixteen years later, in Part II, the Divide is populated, and Alexandra's farm stands out from the rest.

A big white house that stood on a hill, several miles, across the fields. There were so many sheds and outbuildings grouped about it that the place looked not unlike a tiny village...There was something individual about the great farm, a most unusual trimness and care for detail. (OP, 53)

In contrast, when one goes inside her big white house, it is "curiously unfinished and uneven in comfort. One room is papered, carpeted, overfurnished; and the next is almost bare. The pleasantest rooms in the house are the kitchen—where Alexandra's three young Swedish girls chatter and cook and pickle and preserve all summer long—and the sitting-room, in which Alexandra has brought together the old homely furniture that the Bergsons used in the first log house...."(OP, 54) Even though Alexandra is not the domestic artist that her mother was, she wants to make sure she creates that environment, especially in her kitchen. She hires Swedish girls, newly arrived from the old country, to create that sense of order and ritual.

In *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, Sharon O'Brien writes:

The link between Mrs. Bergson and Alexandra reveals Cather's new recognition of artistry among the rituals of domesticity. When Alexandra extends her mother's efforts and transforms the wilderness into a fruitful, orderly garden, she gains the public recognition her mother lacked. But since the daughter is in a sense carrying on and expanding the work her mother began, the two women are collaborators, not competitors: the seeds of the daughter's achievements are in the mother's garden.¹⁵

This idea of the mother using her garden as a training field for her daughter is important. But it goes beyond that. The mother has passed onto her daughter the sense of learning how to make do with what you have. Alexandra created and ordered land that most people were ready to give up on. The Divide, to many farmers who left, was a godforsaken place where nothing would grow. But as Mrs. Bergson could find something to preserve even if on a deserted island, then Alexandra could make something of land that other people had abandoned.

In *Willa Cather's Transforming Vision*, Gary Brienza writes: "Alexandra is also significant in Cather's fiction as a transitional female hero, one midway between such complete domestic artists as Antonia Shimerda and Cecile Auclair and the earlier Clara Vavrika Ericson or Winifred Alexander."¹⁶ Brienza is pointing out that Alexandra is not an artist like Cecile Auclair or Antonia Shimerda Cuzak, but she is the bridge to Cather's long line of strong domestic artists.

In *Shadows on the Rock*, published eighteen years after *O Pioneers!*, Cather painted one of her most complete domestic artists in Cecile Auclair, a young woman who has been trained by her mother to run the *menage*. Cecile lives with her father in their house in back of the apothecary shop.

On entering his door the apothecary found the front shop empty, lit by a single candle. In the living-room behind, which was partly shut off from the shop by a partition made of shelves and cabinets, a fire burned in the fireplace, and the round dining table was already set with a white cloth, silver candlesticks,

glasses, and two clear decanters, one of red wine and one of white.¹²

This scene paints a picture of an ordered life, of a welcoming place. It focuses on the fireplace and the warmth emanating from it. All through the novel, people who come to the shop to get herbs and cures like to peer into the family living room because it is such a warm, hospitable place: "From this stone kitchen at the back two pleasant emanations...the rich odour of roasting fowl, and a child's voice, singing."(SR, 8)

It is important that we know this stone kitchen is a place which will last. It will not burn if there is a fire, yet there is always fire burning in it. The fire, surrounded by stone, will keep the house constantly warm and cozy. That fire will also help in the preparation of fine and delicate food that keeps the body warm and alive, and most importantly, that keeps the soul nourished and enriched. Biographer James Woodress writes that the fire represented "home, continuity, warmth and domesticity," and the French pioneers protected their culture as if it were a "sacred fire."¹³ This stone kitchen also protects them from the outside forces of nature. Even the living room with its four foot walls will keep out the harsh forces of the uncivilized life in Quebec.

We know that Auclair and his daughter have survived in this place because they have created an environment that is like the old country. "But his dinner Auclair regarded as the thing that kept him a civilized man and a Frenchman. It put him in a mellow mood."(SR, 14) A few pages later we hear that Madame Auclair, before her death, trained her daughter in this domestic artistry. Her mother taught her to take pride in her work, and said that "you will come to love your duties as I do."(SR, 20) In the final weeks of her life, Madame Auclair emphasizes the importance of this artistry. "Without order our lives would be disgusting, like those of the poor savages. At home, in France, we have learned to do all things in the best way, and we are conscientious, and that is why we are called the most civilized people in Europe and other nations envy us."(SR, 20)

That Cecile does take it seriously is reflected in her care of the box of parsley that her mother kept growing in winter. One frigid night when the temperature was below zero, Cecile gets up and covers the parsley. "*Papa, j'ai peur pour le persil.*" She says that she is afraid for the parsley. "It had never frozen in her mother's time, and it should not freeze in hers."(SR, 22) Parsley is an important ingredient in French cooking. It is used not only to flavor soups,

but also to garnish meat and salad dishes. In other words, the physical presentation of a dish is as important as the cooking of it. That Cecile puts this pot of parsley under a blanket to keep it alive says everything. Given their physical environment and the difficulty of procuring food, they could have easily let this care for the presentation and the delicate seasoning slip away. But not the Auclairs. Food is more than nourishment for the body. Food is art. It is beauty amidst the ugliness of the new land.

In *Willa Cather Living*, Edith Lewis talks about Cather's love of fine French cooking and how they hired Josephine to be their *femme de menage* while they lived on 5 Bank Street:

Josephine was just over from France, and spoke no English....Her personality was so pervasive and uncompromising that she created a sort of French household atmosphere around us; and I think there is no question that this contributed...to such novels as *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*.¹⁴

Josephine's kitchen was like Cecile's kitchen, creating French culture in her American home. Cather loved to have guests over for dinner, and her home with Josephine at the center was a source of pride and beauty. One can see that Cather might have modeled the character of Madame Auclair from Josephine, whom she admired and valued.

Cecile's mother imbued in her daughter a sense of beauty and order in daily living. She reminds her to change the linen sheets every two weeks and to hire a lady to help launder and iron them in the spring. The narrator tells us that "Careless people got through the winter on smoked eels and frozen fish, but if one were willing to take enough trouble, one could live very well, even in Quebec." (SR, 38) Each fall her father filled their cupboards and cellar with the necessary provisions for winter. "Every fall Auclair put down six dozen of them [wood doves] in melted lard. He had six stone jars in his cellar for that purpose." (SR, 38) Lynn R. Beideck-Porn writes: "Euclid Auclair, the apothecary, 'the guardian of the stomach,' preserves the right of human comfort through his apothecary shop....Likewise, he supplies his home with the things essential to maintain 'survival with order, decency and beauty'."¹⁵

James Woodress tells the story that Governor Wilbur Cross of

Connecticut, ex-professor at Yale, wrote a positive review of *Shadows on the Rock* and Cather was pleased. "The domestic life of the Auclaires interested her 'more than Indian raids or the wild life in the forests' and she told Cross, '...a new society begins with the salad dressing more than with the destruction of Indian villages.'"¹⁶

How did Cather get to this point? Espousing a philosophy that says salad dressing was more important to her than the wild forest life seems contradictory for the adolescent Cather growing up in Red Cloud. As a young woman, Cather did not want anything to do with the domestic arts, shunning housework and cooking, and instead working with the town doctor, calling herself William Cather, Jr., wearing men's clothing, and cutting off her hair. Merrill Maguire Skaggs writes:

As a side effect of this book [*Shadows on the Rock*], Cather may have relieved her own daughterly guilt by creating an offspring who was everything she had never been, and who therefore could be imagined to keep her important places safe. As a ritual penance she may have given idealized parents the perfect firstborn female that her own parents never had.¹⁷

Domestic artistry was something Cather witnessed growing up, and something she avoided. Ann Romincs points out that "Cecile's situation is in many ways the very story that young Willa Cather so determinedly turned her back on, in Red Cloud."¹⁸ Yet Cather saw her mother, grandmother, Mrs. Miner and the hired girls practicing their art. They kept the order and ritual. They civilized the great Divide, thereby creating an environment where Cather could not only live, but flourish. Unconsciously Cather learned the habits of order, ritual and beauty that were to shape her as a writer.

Willa Cather understood that female creativity had been forced to flow in acceptable and unobtrusive domestic channels. The old women who helped out at the Cather farmhouse during busy seasons—sewing, quilting, preserving—were not only accomplished craftswomen, they were the first storytellers the child encountered. Indigenous artists, in their conversation

they were the preservers and transmitters of culture, myth and folklore....When the Cathers moved to the Nebraska Divide in 1884, the nine-year-old Willa encountered more women she would later recognize as artists—the immigrant farm wives who combined storytelling craft with creative skill at women's life-sustaining tasks of cooking, gardening, preserving.¹⁹

Even though Cather rebelled against following a traditional role, she enjoyed the benefits of domestic artistry. Cather could not have lived in the squalor of a cave or a house without good food, clean surroundings, crafted pieces of furniture, good stories, good books, or good music. Even though she ran from following in her grandmother and mother's footsteps, she recognized that their work required skill, just as did the work of other artists who created operas, books, and fine clothes—things she relished.

Today, finally these domestic arts are being recognized. "In 1970 a group of New York women artists stormed the Whitney Museum...another group examined the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and exposed its buying habits...of the thousands of art works in the permanent collection, a scant 2% were done by women."²⁰ As a result of the examination of women's place in the art world, we had at the same time a "reawakening" to women's art of everyday use, or indigenous art, which had been scorned for many years by gallery owners, collectors and other "high" artists. No one would ever expect to go into a gallery to look at a quilt or painted china plates or a perfect soufflé. Those arts, because they were performed by mostly women, had been diminished.

Feminist critic Elaine Showalter maintains that the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s brought a "new interest in women's art"²¹ and domestic artistry was revalued and recognized. Showalter pointed out that the "power of creating also belongs to those who work in kitchens and factories, nurture children and adorn homes, sweep streets or harvest crops, type in offices or manage them."²²

What was so important about this recognition of domestic artistry was that it bonded women, many writers and artists like Cather, back to their mothers. It gave value to those arts that kept alive their households and culture in pioneer villages like Red Cloud. Cather, I believe, saw that she had more in common with her mother and grandmother and Mrs. Miner than she had ever considered possible at age sixteen. For now, they were bonded or connected by their

artistry. Cather's artistry was her fiction, but her grandmother and mother's artistry was their household with its beauty, ritual, order and most importantly its fine food. One can now see how Cather's views on domestic artistry evolved. Her artistic philosophy cannot be clearer than this statement made in 1927. "The German housewife who sets before her family on Thanksgiving Day a perfectly roasted goose, is an artist."²³

NOTES

1. Robert Hughes, "An Obsessive Feminist Pantheon: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party turns history to agitprop." *Time*, 15 December 1980, 85.
2. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage* (New York: Anchor Press, 1979), 238.
3. Elaine Showalter, *Sister's Choice: Traditions and Change in American Women's Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 161.
4. Josephine Donovan, "The Pattern of Birds and Beasts: Willa Cather and Women's Art," *Writing the Woman Artist: Essays on Poetics, Politics, and Portraiture*, ed. Suzanne W. Jones (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 83.
5. Elaine Showalter, "Piecing and Writing," *The Poetics of Gender*, ed. Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 225.
6. Mildred R. Bennett, *The World of Willa Cather* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), 168.
7. Donovan, 83.
8. Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 18. Subsequent references to this work will be cited parenthetically within the text.
9. James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 232.
10. Sharon O'Brien, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 441.
11. Gary Brienzo, *Willa Cather's Transforming Vision: New France and the American Northeast* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1994), 30.
12. Willa Cather, *Shadows on the Rock* (New York: Vintage Classics, 1995), 7. Subsequent references to this work will be cited parenthetically within the text.
13. Woodress, 428.
14. Edith Lewis, *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1953), 89.
15. Lynn R. Beideek-Porn, "A Celebration of Survival Seeced: Food in the Narrative of Willa Cather." *Images of the Self As Female: The Achievement of Women Artists in Re-envisioning Feminine Identity*, eds. Kathryn N. Benzel and Lauren Pringle De La Vars (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 221.
16. Woodress, 425.
17. Merrill Maguire Skaggs, *After the World Broke in Two: The Later Novels of Cather* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 139.
18. Ann Romines, *The Home Plat: Women, Writing & Domestic Ritual* (Amherst: The University

of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 154.

19. Sharon O'Brien. "Mothers, Daughters, and the 'Art Necessity': Willa Cather and the Creative Process," *American Novelists Revisited: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, ed. Fritz Fleischmann (Boston: G.K. Hall & co., 1982), 268.

20. "Woman's Art: It's the only goddam energy around," *Ms.*, December 1977, 41.

21. Showalter, *Sister's Choice: Traditions and Change in American Women's Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 161.

22. *Ibid.*, 175.

23. Bennett, 168.