

'Living Large': Love Story Of Wilna Hervey & Nan Mason

Living Large: Wilna Hervey and Nan Mason by Joseph P. Eckhardt; Woodstock Arts, www.woodstockarts.com, 2015; 200 pages, hardcover, \$39.50.

Living Large: Wilna Hervey and Nan Mason, by silent film historian Joseph P. Eckhardt, is a dual biography of Wilna Hervey, a 6-foot-3-inch, 300-pound heiress, film actress and artist, and Nan Mason, her 5-foot-tall best friend, artist, and ultimately, life partner.

Living Large is a love story of two outcast women who had a mutual passion for art and life; whose unflinching enthusiasm permeated everything they did, whether it was creating art, building a real estate empire, trying their luck as farmers, painting houses or entertaining bar patrons with medleys of quaint old songs.

Through her impressive size, Hervey won the role of "The Powerful Katrinka" in the *Toonerville Trolley* comedies of the early 1920s. Her evocation of Katrinka was so successful that it became a permanent part of her identity.

While filming on location in the Philadelphia suburbs, Wilna Hervey met Nan Mason, daughter of her *Toonerville* co-star, Dan Mason. As Wilna's cinema work began to wane, she and Nan discovered that they had a mutual passion for art, whether it was painting landscapes and portraits or making enameled plaques. They decided to pursue careers as artists in the famed artists' colony at Woodstock, N.Y. As artists, Wilna Hervey and Nan Mason evolved into accomplished and imaginative talents, exploring a wide variety of genres over the course of their long careers.

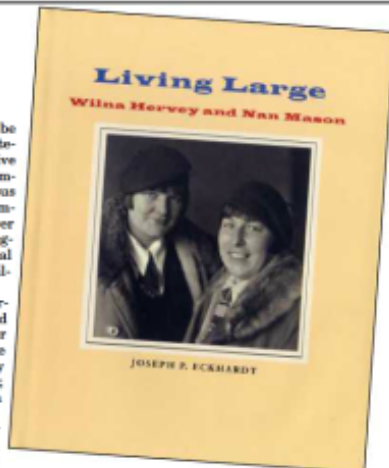
As a same-sex couple, living in one of the few Ameri-

can communities where they could comfortably be themselves, the "Big Girls," as they were affectionately known locally, carved out extraordinarily creative lives for themselves. Uninterested in defining themselves except as artists, they lived a free and joyous existence, fully participating in the life of their community. They hosted some of the wildest parties ever seen in the Catskills, and frequently used their legendary "full moon" soirees to raise money for local causes such as the Woodstock Library and the children's health center.

Their many friends included a number of noteworthy figures in Twentieth Century American arts and letters: film director Frank Capra; photographer Edward Weston; portrait artist Eugene Speicher; the Whitney Museum's Julianna Force; painters Henry Lee McPee, William Puchner and Charles Rosen; and children's book illustrators Maud and Miska Petersham.

Hervey and Mason were inseparable for the better part of six decades. Their unflinching devotion to each other was respected and admired. Their enduring partnership, the art it inspired and their go-for-broke lifestyle form the major narrative arc of *Living Large*. "They got an astonishing amount done," Eckhardt said. "Their reaction to the sun coming up was, 'What do we want to do today?'"

Author Joseph P. Eckhardt is emeritus professor of history at Montgomery County Community College in Blue Bell, Penn. His first book *The King of the Movies: Film Pioneer, Siegmund Lubin*, is the foundation of a feature-length documentary film about Lubin. Eckhardt is also the author of *So Bravely and So Well: The*



Life and Art of William

T. Trigo, 2011, published by the James A. Michener Art Museum and distributed by the University of Pennsylvania Press.

The fun-filled *Living Large* biography is also replete with color photographs of the artists' works and a large number of black and white vintage images of their lives as travelers, artists, farmers and part-makers. A delight to read, this book crosses many boundaries.

—A.K.

Wilna & Nan: Two Woodstock Originals At James Cox Gallery

WILLOW, N.Y. — An exhibit of artwork by two Woodstock's favorite, early legendary figures — Wilna Hervey and Nan Mason — will be featured at the James Cox Gallery at Woodstock, beginning with an opening reception on Friday, July 10, from 5 to 8 pm.

"Wilna and Nan a Tribute to Two Woodstock Originals" will showcase artwork created by the popular couple, as well as vintage photographs from Hervey's days as a star of the *Toonerville Trolley* silent movies, charming professional portraits of the couple as young women and candid photos taken over the course of their 59-year partnership. Both were large women, with Hervey standing 6 foot, 3 inches tall and weighing more than 350 pounds and Mason by no means dwarfed by her affable companion, who was known to early moviegoers as The Powerful Katrinka.

Both artists were well trained by prominent Woodstock artists, most notably Winold Reiss in Wilna's case and Charles Rosen in Nan's. Much of the artwork in this exhibit will feature baked

enamel on copper pieces, which Wilna began to create in the mid-fifties, after taking a class offered by the Woodstock Guild of Craftsmen.

Each artist's approach to this medium is quite different, according to James Cox. Whereas Hervey's works are more whimsical and usually employ a light impressionistic palette, Mason's lean toward semiabstract motifs and bolder colors, employing designs influenced by the Cubist movement. All 40 works in the exhibit have been remounted, using elegant "floater frames," Cox explained.

Wilna Hervey and Nan Mason were beloved in the art colony of Woodstock, where they lived comfortably for nearly 60 years. They hosted the wildest parties in town and were fondly referred to by everyone as "The Big Girls."

The exhibit at the Cox Gallery follows publication of a book about Hervey and Mason by Joseph P. Eckhardt entitled *Living Large: Wilna Hervey and Nan Mason*, published by Woodstock Arts (see companion book review). Eckhardt describes a partnership "defined not only by the

remarkable variety of things they accomplished...but also by their steadfast devotion to living life for all it was worth." He adds that they were never apart from the fall of 1923 until Wilna's death in 1979. The women met in 1920 on the movie set of the *Toonerville Trolley* where Mason's

father was playing the role of The Skipper and Hervey, The Powerful Katrinka.

Eckhardt is also responsible for digitizing one of Hervey's silent *Toonerville Trolley* comedies: "The Skipper's Narrow Escape," 1921. The Woodstock Historical Society will be exhibiting this film, art by,

and memorabilia about Wilna and Nan through July and August.

The exhibit will continue through August 2. The James Cox Gallery at Woodstock is at 4666 Route 212.

For additional information, www.jamescoxgallery.com and 845-679-7608.



"Fishing Wharf" by Wilna Hervey, enamel on copper, 6 by 6 inches.



"City 1" by Nan Mason, enamel on copper, 6 by 4½ inches.