Art for All: The Artistic Journey of Julia Elizabeth Tolbert

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ART FOR ALL:

THE ARTISTIC JOURNEY OF JULIA ELIZABETH TOLBERT

By Julie Woodson

Art History Honors Thesis

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Wofford College
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INTRODUCTION & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Progressing from a student, concentrating on absorbing foundational skills and techniques to an intentional, expressionistic painter, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert spent twenty years of her life creating art. Using formal educational opportunities as a way to escape the life intended for her, she found art to be a freeing and meaningful endeavor. She experimented greatly in both style and medium, working with movements such as the Ashcan school, Regionalism, and Cubism and creating works in watercolor, oil, encaustic, pencil, clay, and more, all in pursuit of a professional artistic career. Though physical and visual limitations ultimately prevented her long-term success, Tolbert received her Master in Fine Arts from the University of Georgia, where she worked with the school’s influential department head, artist Lamar Dodd, and exhibited with the Greenville Fine Arts League (later the Greenville County Museum of Art), the Southern States Art League, and the Carolina Art Association (later the Gibbes Museum of Art), earning several awards and honorable mentions over the years. In 1951, her work, Houses of Athens, a gouache, was purchased by the Gibbes Gallery (now Museum) as a notable example of contemporary Southern art. Today, the largest collection of her work, more than three hundred pieces, resides in the Wofford College Fine Arts Collection where her family generously placed it so that it may be seen, studied, and appreciated. Emerging from the artistic journey of Julia Elizabeth Tolbert is the story of a creative and independent woman working against the arduous currents of chauvinism and provincialism to produce art for all viewers.

Tolbert, who was a South Carolina native, was a part of the larger history of Southern art, which, until recently, has received little scholarly attention. The idea of the “South” can often be difficult to define, as it lends itself to many different geographic, cultural, and historical responses. For the purpose of this paper, the South is defined as a region of the United States that
is composed of the states that seceded from the US in 1861. This includes Alabama, Arkansas, Tennessee, Mississippi, Florida, Georgia, Texas, North Carolina, South Carolina, Louisiana and Virginia.

In the past few decades, Southern art has captured the attention of many individuals and institutions. Much of the South and its artists, particularly the surprising number of women artists working as professionals, have been inevitably overlooked due to the long-standing belief that the South did not have a strong, unified art scene. While the North with its large cities attracted artists, art schools, and vibrant cultural scenes, the South did not. The region as a whole remained overwhelmingly rural and agricultural. Artists in the South were not credited as being stylistic innovators, which therefore, meant to many, they were unworthy of close study.¹

However, a tradition of Southern painting does exist. Though no stylistically-cohesive group has been established, Southern artists are instead bound by uniquely southern experiences. Emerging trends and themes of art of the American South include common images of historic Southern cities, quaint, sometimes stereotypical depictions of the African American lower class, and scenes that highlight the rural South as an alternative to the urbanization and industrialization of the North. Southern art often reveals a deep reverence for tradition and can be characterized by images of the present combined with allusions to the past.²

While Julia Elizabeth Tolbert was a woman artist working during a pivotal time in the Southern regionalist movement, her work often reveals a more progressive outlook on the world, which was mirrored in her life as well. Much like other artists of her time, she was a white, native Southerner from a privileged, well-educated background. However, while many artists would idealize the South, curating an image of its serenity, traditions, and beauty, Tolbert would

² Dennison, “Art of the American South,” 11.
instead depict life as she saw it. At times, her work is beautiful and idealized, and at others, it reflects the tensions of the world, thus embracing and reflecting her own life experience. Underlining it all is her notion that art can be for all people. She wrote: “It is the art product that expands our horizon, perfects our perception, removes personal prejudice, and reveals ways of feeling and seeing other than our own.”

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This essay is the product of my year-long Art History Honors Research Project. My goal for the Fall and Spring semesters was to build upon the knowledge of the artist’s life and experiences, so that we could better understand her work, most of which resides in the Wofford College Fine Arts Collection. I would not have been able to do this without the help of many people. Assisting with my research was Tim Brown, Wofford Research Librarian; Jane Tuttle, Library Director at Columbia College; April Akins, Lander University Archivist; Chuck Barber, Associate Director of the Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library of the University of Georgia; and the staff at the South Caroliniana Library. I am grateful for the time and effort each one of these people invested into my research process. I would like to thank Martha R. Severens for her gracious interest, guidance, and advice, even though she had no vested interest in the project. I am especially thankful to her as well for connecting me with Sara Arnold, Curator of the Gibbes Museum, and Bill Eiland, Director of the Georgia Museum of Art, both of whom generously provided their time and resources to me. I extended my deepest appreciation to the entire Wofford College Art History department, most especially Dr. Karen Goodchild and Dr. Youmi Efurd for continuously supporting, encouraging, and guiding me not only over the past year but my whole four years at Wofford. Finally, I would like to acknowledge Dr. Thomas and

Judy Tolbert, who have donated the Tolbert Collection on behalf of their family to Wofford College. Without them, none of this would have been possible.
I. THE EARLY YEARS: Greenwood County

Julia Elizabeth Tolbert was born on June 24, 1911 to Joseph Warren Tolbert and Julia Elizabeth DeLoach Tolbert in Ninety Six, South Carolina. Her childhood was often full of trying and arduous experiences; however, these early experiences developed her into the independent women she came to be.

Tolbert’s parents, Joseph Warren Tolbert and Julia Elizabeth DeLoach married in a private ceremony in a family home in 1910. Retrospectively, Julia Elizabeth DeLoach Tolbert remembers her wedding as being “in Cousin Jacob's parlor with no guests because both of us were older and did not want to be bothered with a big to-do.” Unlike many other weddings, their marriage never appeared in the newspapers, so exact information has largely been lost today. However, the practicality and simplicity of their wedding seems to have been a common thread in their life and one that they passed down to their children as well.

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4 Dr. Thomas Tolbert (nephew of the artist), email message, January 13, 2015.
The Tolberts owned and operated a large family farm. While Joseph devoted his time to being an active leader of the South Carolina Republican Party, Julia Elizabeth DeLoach was the business woman and even held much of the land in her own name. In her mid-teens, the elder Julia Elizabeth’s father had died, causing her mother to become housebound, and leaving the role of running the family farm to the young DeLoach Tolbert. Though she had a scholarship to Columbia College, her promising future was interrupted, and instead, she had to devote to herself to the agricultural realm and fulfilling her familial obligations.\(^5\)

Julia Elizabeth Tolbert’s early life was based in Greenwood County, and her family was fairly unconventional. Her parents lived separate lives for the most part, though they remained married. Tolbert’s mother remained in her childhood home so that she could continue overseeing the farm, while Joseph split his time between Greenwood and Washington, D.C for his political endeavors. Tolbert and her two younger brothers, Joseph Lincoln (1915 - 1981) and William Warren (1917-1919) went back and forth between them, having bedrooms in both houses. Julia Elizabeth was quite inquisitive as a young girl and had very different relationships with her parents. While her father showed his only daughter favoritism and encouraged her ambitions, her mother expected her as the eldest to follow in her own footsteps of managing the family agricultural business, which was quite the undertaking.

Violence, death, and grief plagued Julia Elizabeth’s young life. The Tolbert family were political anomalies as prominent Republicans in a state “where being white had become almost synonymous with being a Democrat.”\(^6\) Though they were described as being well-educated, respectable, and generally likeable, the Tolberts seemed to always be at odds with their

\(^5\) Dr. Thomas Tolbert, email message, January 13, 2015.
neighbors. They’d opposed secession and voted for Republican Candidate General Ulysses S. Grant in the 1868 Presidential Election. Ever since the Civil War, the majority of white Southerners were pushing for political legislation that kept African Americans as second class citizens, devoid of any resemblance of freedom and equality. However, the Tolbert men, exceptions to their white neighbors, actively challenged these attempts both in politics and in behavior.

Despite the fact that it occurred before the birth of Julia Elizabeth, one major example of this conflict is the Phoenix Election Riot of 1898. Phoenix, S.C., now a part of Greenwood County, was primarily a community of cotton farmers, with divisions rippling through the county based on class, race, and political party lines. However, one place brought everyone together, Watson and Lake’s General Store in Phoenix. On the porch of the general store, which served as the polling site in 1898, Thomas Payne Tolbert (Tom), brother of Julia’s father, waited to collect affidavits from African Americans who were not allowed to place their votes. By doing so, Tom Tolbert and his fellow Republicans hoped to expose the electoral fraud that had been depriving African Americans the right to vote for years.

However, they did not get the chance before local Democratic party leaders, J.I. “Bose” Etheridge and Robert Cheatham, led a mob of white men to order Tom Tolbert and several African Americans to leave. When they refused, violence broke out, and Bose Etheridge ended up dead with a bullet through the forehead. No one knew who fired the first shot, but Etheridge’s Democratic allies opened fire on Tolbert and the African American men. Many were injured, including Tom Tolbert, who was shot multiple times. However, he remained standing, and

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9 Wilk, 29.
reportedly, turned to the crowd that had formed and shouted upon his retreat, “I have not a friend left at my back. You have shot me nearly to death, but you have not changed my politics one iota.”

Though the Tolbert men received federal political appointments and positions for their lasting commitment to the Republican party, Tom Henderson Wells points out that that their motivations were not solely political; their obligation to stand up for the basic rights of African Americans stemmed from their moral principles and was aided by their stubbornness. As Robert Red Tolbert, Julia Elizabeth’s great-grandfather, once said, they showed “preference for Negroes who would work hard and pay their way and try to do right over the shiftless white trash who are the curse of a Southern community.”

The extended Tolbert family owned several thousand acres of land and employed African American tenants at considerably higher wages than their neighbors. Because of the fact that some white farmers could not find work, their employment choices did not sit well with their white, Democratic neighbors due to their perceived lack of racial loyalty. More so than other white families in the South, the Tolberts viewed their tenant farmers as family, regardless of race, and took time to get to know them on a personal level. Wash Day [Figure 1.1], a 1939 painting by Julia Elizabeth Tolbert depicts one of the tenant farmers that lived on her family's land, performing the laborious task of laundry. According to Dr. Thomas Tolbert, nephew of Julia Elizabeth, the woman featured here is Corrie, the wife of George King, one of the Tolbert’s longest tenant farmers. This is significant because unlike many other Southern artists, Tolbert

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10 Wilk, 30.
12 Wells, 59.
14 Dr. Thomas Tolbert, email message, April 17, 2018.
15 Dr. Thomas Tolbert in conversation with the author, April 19, 2018.
was not painting generic scenes of African Americans but images of people she knew personally, showing her family’s sympathetic viewpoint.

After the election day incident, men from all over South Carolina came to Phoenix to avenge the death of Etheridge. The Tolberts and their tenant farmers were driven from their homes, escaping to Columbia and other nearby cities. By the end of the riots, four black men were lynched on the front steps of Rehoboth church, a church for which the Tolbert family had given the land to build, and where they and many other whites worshipped on Sundays. Many more men, both white and black, were dead. No one was ever charged for any of these incidents, now known as the Phoenix Riot.

Not only was white supremacy a social and economic reality in the South in the Julia Elizabeth Tolbert lived, but it became a legal reality as well due to the SC Constitution of 1895, which kept the black population, a majority of South Carolina, from voting.\textsuperscript{16} During this era in South Carolina history, many believed that white unity was a crucial aspect of their community, and white “traitors” were suspected to be more dangerous than any black man. In the period after the Phoenix Election riot, the Tolberts did try to make amends with their neighbors. Elias Tolbert, great-uncle to Julia Elizabeth, submitted a letter to \textit{The Watchman and Southron} on November 16, 1898, that attempted to win over his white neighbors, denouncing his role and stating his intent to “stand shoulder to shoulder with the white people.” However, in the same issue, the “whites of Phoenix” state their belief that the “evil influences” of the Tolbert family will put the entire town in peril and that they “earnestly hope that they will choose to remove themselves and their evil influences soon.” However, not only did the Tolbert family remain in Greenwood, but they did not give up their Republican ties.

In the years after the Phoenix Riot, the Tolberts faced repercussions because of their progressive beliefs. One major problem they faced was having their neighbors set their houses on fire. In the 1910s, Tom Tolbert, the original affidavit collector from the 1898 incident, decided to build a house entirely out of materials that would not burn if caught on fire. Held together by cement, the Rock House is a two-story structure that is made entirely from quarried rock. Each feature, including the roof, staircase, and furniture, was made from iron or steel, impenetrable to the outside world. Surrounding the house, on the street named for the Rock House, were other structures, all made from wood. Clustered together throughout the land were stables, an outdoor kitchen, an outhouse, a post office/general store, and houses for tenant farmers. Julia Elizabeth’s father, Joseph W. Tolbert, lived with his brother, Tom, in the Rock House for much of Julia Elizabeth’s young life, and she had a bedroom on the second floor. Though a fire in the 1950s destroyed each of the other structures, the Rock House still stands today.

For Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, her childhood was still marked by residual hostility. According to Julia’s nephew, Dr. Thomas Tolbert, she was isolated and abused by her peers in
school: “Grandmother Tolbert told me that as a child, Julia Elizabeth often was tormented by the other children, who reflected hostilities against her as they had seen in their parents direct against Julia Elizabeth’s parents and grandfather.”¹⁷ The negative attitudes towards the entire Tolbert family did not disappear overnight, and Dr. Tolbert continues, recalling memories from his own childhood in Greenwood: “As late as the 6th grade, I recall having to duck rocks and at times pieces of broken plate-glass that were hurled at my brother and me as we walked home from school. Julia Elizabeth once told me, “one has to learn to overlook some things or you will have no one to talk to”. This was spoken not in anger, but in resignation to a pragmatic fact of environment.”¹⁸

Another deeply traumatizing aspect of Julia Elizabeth’s early life was the deaths of six close family members before she reached the age of 20. When she was only two years old, her uncle, William Jacob DeLoach, Julia Elizabeth DeLoach’s only brother, committed suicide by drowning himself in a lake.¹⁹ Months later, his wife, who had moved in with the Tolberts, also died. Her maternal grandmother, who also lived with them, died a year later in 1914, her paternal grandfather died in 1918, and her youngest brother died from Spanish influenza a year later at the age of two. This caused her early outlook on life to be shadowed by death and grief.

Because of her complex and oppressive early life, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert withdrew into herself, out of a desire to avoid the opinions and expectations set for her by the people of Greenwood County as well as her own family. Dr. Tolbert describes her as being independent, free-thinking, and inquisitive, yet feeling a deep inadequacy towards the problems and social issues she observed in the world around her.²⁰ While early twentieth-century society dictated that

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¹⁷ Dr. Thomas Tolbert, email message, April 17, 2018
¹⁸ Dr. Thomas Tolbert, email message, April 17, 2018
¹⁹ “Will DeLoach Commits Suicide,” The Evening Index (Greenwood, SC), Aug. 28, 1913.
²⁰ Dr. Thomas Tolbert, “Anecdotal Items Related to August 23, 2017 Tour in Greenwood County.”
as a white woman she should be quiet, calm, and genteel, she could not help but be
compassionate and curious. Her precocious spirit motivated her to seek more, despite the lack of
support from her family and community, and find a sense of comfort in communities where she
could be herself.
Fig. 1.1: *Wash Day*, 1939, Oil on Canvas, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
II. FINDING HER WAY: Columbia College

In the late-nineteenth-century, higher education was largely male-dominated in the United States. Women’s rightful and natural place was believed to be in the home, where they could care for their families and the house. College education was for men, not for their wives. Things were even worse in the American South. Higher education institutions were single-gendered, which meant that there were few opportunities available to women. What spots existed were only available to a select group of white females who had the financial means of making it possible, and even then, there were only a few options for schools. In South Carolina, one of the few colleges for women was Columbia College in Columbia, S.C, which opened in 1859. The curriculum and courses offered were often dramatically different than what male students were receiving. Instead of providing an equal opportunity, women’s colleges largely reinforced typical gender conventions, serving in many cases as more of a finishing school than a higher education facility. They educated women to become proper, accomplished young women and ready to marry.

However, some young women wanted more of out of their education. While female students were largely contained within the bounds of societal norms, education did lead to more freeing opportunities. As a white women of a reasonably comfortable economic background, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert was the exact student women’s colleges were created for, and she welcomed the opportunity for an escape from life on a slow Southern farm. Although her father supported her self-determination, it was Tolbert’s mother, for whom she was named, who objected to her leaving home for school.
The elder Julia Elizabeth DeLoach Tolbert was a spitfire. Even while working as town postmistress, she ran the extensive family farming business almost entirely on her own. In many ways, the two Tolbert women were very much alike, but their relationship was never peaceful or even pleasant. Both were fiercely independent and stubborn, never fulfilling the typical conventions of quiet, genteel Southern ladies. Tolbert’s mother preached family loyalty, demanding her to be dedicated and dutiful. As mentioned previously, DeLoach Tolbert had always planned on college, and she had been awarded a full scholarship to Columbia College. However, this promising path was shattered when her father died suddenly. Her mother became housebound and the role of running their extensive farm fell on Julia Elizabeth DeLoach Tolbert. DeLoach Tolbert expected the same for her daughter as the oldest child. To the younger Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, the thought of managing the large-scale family land was an overwhelming burden. Thus when, in 1929, Tolbert received a scholarship to Columbia College, she enrolled and left home, disregarding her mother’s wishes.

While her relationship with her mother would never be fully healed, Tolbert thrived in the academic setting and new environment. Her transcript shows a great variety of courses that not only fulfill the requirements for her degree but demonstrate a desire to learn and broaden her horizons. Tolbert majored in English at Columbia College. She took classes on writers such as Chaucer and Spenser and developed a great love of Shakespeare at the encouragement of a beloved English professor, Dr. J. M. Ariail. For 60 years, James Milton Ariail, PhD, was a significant figure at Columbia College, serving as a professor of English and as College President, and he was the first of several influential mentors Tolbert would acquire. A

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21 Dr. Thomas Tolbert, email message, January 13, 2015.
22 Jerold J. Savory and S. C. Columbia College, Columbia College: The Ariail Era, Columbia, S.C: R. L. Bryan, 1979. Dr. Ariail received a B.A. from Wofford College and his Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
passionate teacher, Ariail was deeply committed to the students and faculty of Columbia College.

One notable example of this was when Georgia O’Keeffe, only 27 at the time, came to teach art at Columbia College in 1915. After leaving the vibrant culture of New York, O’Keeffe felt isolated and unhappy in her first few months in South Carolina. O’Keeffe lived in a small dormitory room on campus as the school could not afford to pay her very much; living next door were the Ariails. Dr. Ariail and his family devoted much of their time to making their new on-campus neighbor feel at home. Well-read, friendly, and brimming with Southern hospitality, Dr. Ariail became one of O’Keefe’s closest friends at Columbia College. Eventually, Georgia O’Keeffe found her place and discovered the reason she was meant to be there. It turned out that the surrounding countryside and alone time allowed her to find her own voice in art. No longer paying attention to opinions of teachers, peers, and other outside influences, she would later attribute this time, as well as Dr. Ariail, as starting her “on her way.”

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In a similar fashion, Columbia College helped Julia Elizabeth Tolbert to find her way and her place. Not only did Tolbert enroll in challenging courses, but she was extremely involved in student organizations. While it seemed to be the norm for other students to be active outside of the classroom, as well, Tolbert took on many leadership roles. Her notable accomplishments during her four years at Columbia College included serving as class Historian, Editor-in-Chief of *The Criterion*, the college’s literary journal, Associate Editor of the *Columbian*, the yearbook, and a student delegate for the South Carolina Press Association. With her English major and involvement in many relevant organizations, it was clear that Tolbert had a love for writing and literature. These things opened doors for her and gifted her a sense of belonging, something it seems she had never fully experienced. However, according to a 1946 issue of *The Index-
Journal, it was also during her time at Columbia College that Julia Elizabeth Tolbert discovered her love of art.²⁶

Though the exact question of how is uncertain, as no records show her taking any formal art courses, she was likely exposed to the arts in the academic environment through exhibitions, fellow classmates, faculty members, and the general nature of the campus. As Columbia College, an all-women’s Methodist school, was set on grooming accomplished young women, the arts were very likely a part of all young women’s education. Upon graduation, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert decided to turn her attention away from the written language and channel her creativity into the visual arts.

²⁶ “Julia Elizabeth Tolbert Discovers Talent in Art Following College Course,” The Index-Journal (Greenwood, SC), Jul. 5, 1946.
In 1933, new graduate Julia Elizabeth Tolbert decided to pursue the visual arts and began by taking a few courses at the women’s college close to her home, Lander College (now University), located in Greenwood, SC. In her first semester, Tolbert took two courses, Art I: drawing, and Art III: design, earning A’s in both. This first semester seems like a trial, almost as if she was testing the waters before jumping fully into the art world. For the next few years, she continued enrolling in courses, earning a certificate in art as well as a position as an art instructor for the department, showing her interest and success. While Columbia College had given Tolbert her first taste of independence, Lander College provided her with a realistic look at a life beyond the family farm and a professional career in the arts instead. Through opportunities for teaching, exhibiting, and nurturing an artistic community, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert’s began to work towards a tangible goal of a professional career as an artist.
Tolbert’s choice to pursue art professionally by enrolling in formal institutions was not uncommon. Just as education reforms were spreading throughout the Nation, changes were afoot in the artistic world as well. Women were challenging the masculine territory and asserting themselves in the arts and in art institutions. By seeking professional, academic art training, women artists forced the male-controlled art world to take them seriously. The professional identity as an artist allowed them to reconstruct the narrative of women in the arts as something more than a symbol of their refinement and sophistication but instead, as a way for them to demonstrate their seriousness. Pursuing a career, perhaps especially a career in the arts, required a certain amount of unconventionality, which, luckily enough for Tolbert, she possessed.

Beginning with her very first course, Tolbert was taught by the head of the Lander art department, and the only art instructor at the time, Miss Marie Chisholm (1900-1994) from Garnett, South Carolina. Chisholm, a graduate of Lander in 1922, was a significant figure in the launch of Tolbert’s artistic career.27 Her first formal instructor, Marie Chisholm also became one of her closest and most influential mentors and friends. It is unlikely that without Chisholm and her consistent guidance and friendship, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert would have pursued art in the same motivated and driven manner. Perhaps because Tolbert was not close with her mother, she found in Chisholm the support system she needed to fully seek out a professional career, which happened to be in the arts.

27 “Chisholm Leaves Mark on Greenwood,” The Index-Journal (Greenwood, SC), Aug. 4, 1994. Starting in 1928, Chisholm taught and managed the art department at Lander for 43 years. Her legacy continues with annual scholarship given to an art major.
Before they became close friends, Chisholm was Julia Elizabeth’s first art instructor, providing her with an introduction to painting through foundational courses. In early works by Tolbert, the impact of Chisholm is quite clear; seen side by side, their work is almost indistinguishable without signature. Marie Chisholm and Julia Elizabeth Tolbert drew from a very similar subject matter, mainly landscapes and still lifes. This is shown in “Floral Fantasy” by Marie Chisholm [Figure 3.1] and an untitled work by Julia Elizabeth [Figure 3.2].

Stylistically, the works are also almost identical. A tall, frame-filling natural still life sits on a flat plane in the foreground. Alike in the orientation of the image and the soft, naturalistic depiction of the scene, these two pieces demonstrate a similar way of thinking about painting through the building of the composition and framing of the subject.

In addition to teaching and painting with Tolbert, Chisholm gave her a job as her assistant in the art department, perhaps because she saw a kindred spirit in Julia Elizabeth, who was only ten years younger than herself, and wanted to encourage her artistic pursuits. Together, they nurtured a flourishing art department at Lander. As a two-person department, Julia Elizabeth aided Chisholm in almost everything. She taught courses, planned exhibitions and events, and advised the Art Club. While Chisholm handled the more advanced classes, Tolbert taught Lettering, which covered “the history of lettering, the making of letters, and the application to posters and illustrations,” as

“Miss Chisholm and Miss Tolbert await guest on studio steps,” 1938, *The Naiad*, Lander University
well as Elementary Drawing. These courses allowed her to practice and perfect her techniques, while also giving her an opportunity to try out teaching, which she would return to as a profession several times over the course of her life.

Under the direction of Chisholm and Tolbert, the art department put together a number of exhibitions and events to bring art to Lander and the Greenwood community. Many of these exhibitions centered on Southern artists such as Alice Ravenel Huger Smith (1876-1958), whose rice plantation watercolors were on display at Lander in 1939, and regionalist Horace Day (1909-1984) in 1939. However, the exhibitions were not restricted; woodblocks by modernist Blanche Lazzell were displayed in 1938, an exhibition from the Art Students’ League in New York in 1939, and original drawings of costumes by Guy Saunders, a professor at the Ringling School of Art and Design, in 1940. Throughout the years, the exhibitions showcased a variety of mediums, including paintings, photographs, sculptures, etchings, and prints. For such a small town and for a school that was known for their nursing program, Chisholm and Tolbert provided a wide variety of art to the public in a community that would not have had widespread access.

As this was some of Tolbert’s earliest exposures to the regional artists, it is sure that she was observing, learning, and taking inspiration from these exhibitions. Alice R. H. Smith was a leader in the Charleston Renaissance, a time of cultural reawakening for the low-country between the years 1915-1940. Smith is best known for a series of thirty watercolors that illustrated Herbert Sass’s book *A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties*, published in 1936. It was most likely this series that was on display at Lander in 1939. Smith was a skillful watercolorist, a master at building up compositions through layers of translucent brushwork,

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28 Martha R. Severens, *The Charleston Renaissance*, Spartanburg, S.C: Saraland Press, 1998. Alice Ravenel Huger Smith had an enormous impact on the cultural development of Charleston and is one of the most notable twentieth-century Southern Artists. Today, her work is located in many permanent collections including the Gibbes Museum of Art, the High Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, among others.
while still keeping the colors bright. Though her compositions for this series were designed to illustrate a story and depict the daily life on a plantation, many of these works are most remarkable for their landscapes, with the figurative elements blending smoothly into the serene environment. *Sunday Morning at the Great House* [Figure 3.3], the first watercolor from the series, reflects the artist’s delicate brushstrokes, portrayal of natural light, and skillful layering of washes. She seems to have been a master at working with the intrinsic qualities of watercolors, allowing them to bleed together in an effortless manner.

Stylistically, Tolbert seems to have been somewhat influenced by what she saw in Smith’s work. This is demonstrated in her own watercolors, working with the medium to achieve desired atmospheric effects. *Sunlight and Shadows/Morning Sunlight* [Figure 3.4], completed a few years after Smith’s exhibition at Lander, in 1944, features a similar dappled lighting and layering of translucent washes characteristic of Smith, although Tolbert’s brushstrokes are not quite as delicate.

Though not unusual for painters of this time, Smith and Tolbert, as well as Chisholm in *Wash Day* [Figure 3.5], shared commonalities in subject matter, preferring local scenes with an emphasis on landscapes. Alice Ravenel Huger Smith was especially vocal about her point of view which expressed a strong sense of Southern nostalgia. In her 1950 autobiography, *Reminiscences*, she wrote: “I was brought up on the heels of a struggle for personal and sectional liberty and I naturally grew to admire the generation before me. Broken in body with the iron of great despair in their soul, they were brave enough to face the ruins and build again. I have lived

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30 Estill Curtis Pennington, Martha R. Severens, and Johnson Collection (Spartanburg S. C.), *Scenic Impressions: Southern Interpretations from the Johnson Collection* (Spartanburg, South Carolina: The Johnson Collection in Association with The University of South Carolina Press, 2015), 175.
beyond that period and I am eager to follow a new generation in its progress, but my allegiance is divided, first to the old, then to the new. It is useless to try and relive the past just as it is unnecessary to discard everything that came before us.” Smith’s work, especially the series, *A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties*, casts a golden light on her subjects, idealizing them and evoking strong but soothing memories of past times. Julia Elizabeth Tolbert also featured similar nostalgic images, including *A Darky Cabin* [Figure 3.6], one of her earliest works in Wofford’s collection, though Tolbert also painted African Americans she knew personally. In this painting, Tolbert depicts three African-American children leaning against a tree, while a woman shouts from the porch. Although this work is an oil on canvas, the scene is slightly dreamlike, like Smith’s works, because of the sketchy brushstrokes, which elicits a similar sense of nostalgia. Scenes of African Americans were not uncommon and were actually very marketable due to the inclination for an idealized vision of the rural South.

However, throughout her career, Julia never actively pursued selling her work. Her mentor, Chisholm did not seem to make attempts to sell her work either, instead supporting herself financially by teaching art, which was perhaps Tolbert’s goal as well. At the time, the art market was extremely difficult for women artists as dealers seemed to always favor men.31 Teaching was a much more attainable and socially acceptable position for women. Tolbert’s nephew also shares that Julia Elizabeth would not have wanted to subject herself to public taste and risk rejection for putting herself and her art out there.32

Despite the diversity in exhibitions sponsored by the Lander Art Department, there was still a present need to educate the young students to become refined young ladies first and artists

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32 Dr. Thomas Tolbert, email message, April 17, 2018
second. It seems that it was understood that most students would be getting married upon graduation, not pursuing art professionally. According to the Lander College yearbook, *The Naiad*, the Fine Arts Club in 1938 held monthly discussions on topics such as “Art in dress” and “Art in home.” They also had many formal social hours, as all civilized young woman would in the South, which always included refreshments and tea. However, it seemed that marriage was not Julia Elizabeth’s current aspirations and would have, in fact, gotten in the way of her serious artistic pursuits. Instead, Tolbert embraced social gatherings as a way of promoting conversation about art, its history, and contemporary trends.

In several instances, the decor, menu, and guest list of parties and events hosted by Julia Elizabeth Tolbert were reported in the newspaper for the whole town to read. She did her part in hosting the Art Department, sometimes having more than seventy-five people to her mother’s home for a gathering. Though at times quiet and introspective, she was also described by one of her last living relatives as being “effervescent” if the right people were in the room. Mary Jo Tolbert, the wife of one of Julia Elizabeth’s nephews, describes her as this: “Julia Elizabeth was able to create a party atmosphere out of sheer will and sometimes against considerable odds. She could decide to lighten a mood and add a few festive touches with flowers or crafted paper and a few simple foods and have a visit with friends turn into at least a minor celebration.” A big part of this seems to have been Julia Elizabeth’s desire to engage others in intellectual conversation regarding a number of subjects, a favorite of which was art. In Greenwood, where she often did not see eye to eye with those around her, art was a safe conversation topic. In 1936, amidst baskets of tulips and carnations, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert addressed a gathering in the Art Room at Lander, where she read a paper on modern trends in American Art. According to *The Index-Journal*, she concludes with this: “The statement was made, ‘modernity is a purely relative

33 Conversation with Mary Jo, transcribed by Dr. Tolbert in email message, April 17, 2015
term.’ Every age has considered itself modern and has often looked with scorn at its predecessors, but there is no reason why the trends of the present era may not be appreciated without depreciating the past. For indeed, life and art are closely interwoven; life passes, art remains.”

While she was between schools, Tolbert filled her time with more opportunities to hone her artistic skills, travel, and study with regional artists, as recommended by Marie Chisholm. With Chisholm’s help, Julia Elizabeth expanded upon her education by consistently attending summer programs and artist colonies. Artists’ colonies inspired by the long-standing European tradition were appearing around the United States throughout the twentieth-century, and several sprang up in the South between the 1920s and 1930s. Summer art colonies provided instruction in a region where there were few reputable art schools, and women made up a large portion of the participants. Generally, students were encouraged to leave the studio and paint en plein air. This meant that the surrounding landscapes and environments were often the subject of their work, which left behind a unique record of the South and helped to strength the South’s regional identity. For Tolbert, these colonies continued to provide her with a way to practice art and to escape from her restricted life in Ninety Six. The change of scenery, opportunity to train with new artists and instructors, and introduction to larger art communities were a welcome and significant experience for her.

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34 “Mrs. Talbert at Cateechee Meeting,” *The Index-Journal* (Greenwood, SC), Feb. 16, 1936. With the last lines of her conclusion, she cites a famous Latin phrase written by Hippocrates, “ars longa, vita brevis.” This reflects her previous studies at Columbia College, where she was a member of the Latin Club.


36 Dennison, “Summer Art Colonies in the South,” 98.
The first colony she attended was the Beaufort Artist Colony in the seaside town of Beaufort, S.C. In the summers of 1935 and 1936, Tolbert accompanied Marie Chisholm to study under the direction of Walter W. Thompson and Mary Hope Cabaniss, both Georgia artists. Because this was so early on in her artistic training, it was extremely influential. Examples of work that she perhaps completed during her time with the group include Figure 3.8 and 3.9. Beaufort seems to have been one of the only known coastal regions that she painted in, which perhaps suggests that the harbor sketch was completed there, and Dr. Tolbert recalls that Tolbert told him that the pink door was a depiction of St. Helena Church in Beaufort.³⁷ Though the Beaufort Artist Colony only lasted a few summers, it seems that Tolbert maintained contact with those involved as she participated with Thompson and Chisholm in a later exhibition at the Miami Beach Art Center in 1947.³⁸

³⁷ Dr. Thomas Tolbert in conversation with the author, April 19, 2018.
In 1937, Tolbert followed in Chisholm’s footsteps by attending a summer session of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA), one of the most prestigious American art schools. Chester Springs was the Academy’s Country school, and it was known for its beautiful, rural surroundings, described as being “remarkably paintable, with many attractive old dwellings, quaint barns, and spring houses, with old trees, abundant woodland creeks, and ponds with beautiful views at hand.” Students at the PAFA Country School were expected to be “self-governing” and to follow “the principles of honor without specific rules.” Artistic creativity was the guiding rule for their summer sessions, which provided her with a new freedom. In their free time, students had free roam of the countryside. They played tennis, frolicked in the spring-fed pool, picnicked, danced, and put on impromptu plays. For Tolbert, who had never exactly fit in with students her own age, this would have been an idyllic lifestyle and a more welcoming and positive peer group.

According to PAFA’s records, Tolbert was registered in a sculpture course that summer, which would have been a new challenge for her. The Greenville News also reports in October of 1937, that Julia’s summer work at Chester Springs included oils and watercolors. Though no exhibition catalogue survives from the summer Julia Elizabeth attended the PAFA Country School, other records show work that is remarkably similar to hers in style. Country Road, Chester Springs [Figure 3.9] by Paul Wescott (1904-1970) was painted in 1929, eight years before Julia Elizabeth attended. However, the loose brushwork, dappled lighting, and diagonal

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39 Hoang Tran (Director of Archives at PAFA), email message, February 15, 2018. According to records, Chisholm attended Chester Springs for two weeks in 1928.
composition are extremely similar to some of her early works, like in *Up an Alley* [Figure 3.10] and another untitled work [Figure 3.11].

Julia Elizabeth Tolbert possibly attended more summer programs throughout her artistic career, though only documentation from the Beaufort Artist Colony and PAFA have been discovered presently. Overall, these programs helped to fuel her confidence and expand her knowledge and artistic circle. It seems natural that the peaceful, creative, and open-minded environment of artistic communities would appeal to Tolbert as just another way to escape the hardship and provincialism of her “other” life.

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Marie Chisholm also seems to have encouraged Tolbert to exhibit her work to the larger public. In 1937, Chisholm submitted three paintings to the Greenville Fine Arts League’s annual exhibition, which was followed by an arrangement of college student work in the same location. Tolbert, a student at Lander at the time, was reported to have submitted work to this exhibition. The Greenville Fine Arts League started in 1935 as the first effort for organized art activities in Greenville, led primarily by local artists. After the first year, the Fine Arts League showcased work of local artists at the Civic Art Gallery. In the first few years, the gallery was funded through the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration, part of the New Deal. However, this funding only lasted a few years before the members themselves were forced to step up and raise funds. With the loyalty of League members, they began a public-private

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44 Recollections of her family members include more summer programs. One potential example is a summer session at the Ringling School of Art and Design’s retreat in Little Switzerland, N.C., a small mountain town outside of Asheville, between the years 1941 and 1945. This program kept the school “afloat” in the forties, attracting about one hundred students a session. They rented out a rustic retreat called Wildacres for students and faculty to live and study for three months each year. However, the Ringling School could not confirm her enrollment at this time.
45 “Miss Marie Chisholm Contributes to the Fine Arts League Exhibit,” *The Index-Journal* (Greenwood, SC), May 16, 1936
partnership that ultimately turned into the Greenville County Museum of Art after the purchase of the Civic Art Gallery.

Though Tolbert had exhibited work at Lander both with student exhibitions and as a solo artist, the Greenville Fine Arts League was the first major group Julia Elizabeth exhibited with publicly, linking her to a larger art community. By exhibiting with the League, she began to create a name for herself in the art world; she was no longer just a student but an active, practicing artist. Some examples of the work she exhibited with the Greenville Fine Arts League throughout the late 1930s include *Barns and Things* [Figure 3.12], *The Goat Farm* [Figure 3.13], and *A Gypsy from Algiers* [Figure 3.14]. These three works are characteristic of her early style in both subject and handling. Because she chose to enter them, they stand as examples of work she thought successful. *The Goat Farm* and *Barns and Things* depict regional, rural scenes, perhaps even her own family farm, with thick, painterly brushstrokes. She focused on depicting the architectural forms accurately, cropping them in unusual ways to stimulate interest in each composition. While she uses a very saturated color for the ground in *The Goat Farm*, she depicts the subject in *Barns and Things* more realistically and adds more details such as the farming tools in the foreground. The overall effect for both is one of familiarity due to the ordinary subject and gentle treatment.

*A Gypsy from Algiers*, exhibited in the 1939 Greenville Fine Arts League annual exhibition, represents a different genre that Tolbert enjoyed, portraiture. In the Wofford Fine Arts Collection, there are about fifty examples of portrait-style paintings. Due to the large quantity of untitled and unnamed portraits as well as the various styles and outfits of the figures, it seems that these paintings were not intended as formal portraits, but instead, as figure studies.

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47 Many of Tolbert’s works were stored in barns and other unideal conditions before being donated to the Wofford Fine Arts Collection, which perhaps lead to the discoloration of this work. Conservation efforts are currently ongoing for the collection.
most likely completed as a class exercise. In *A Gypsy from Algiers*, Tolbert depicts an androgynous figure in an exotic costume. The various fabrics draped around his head and body provided more challenging materials for her to paint, as well as allowed for a more unusual portrait. Amongst more traditional portraits of people, such as fellow students, dressed in typical attire, Tolbert painted several other exotic portraits, including Figure 3.15 and *Alpine Climber* [Figure 3.16], which is almost certainly the same male model in *A Gypsy from Algiers*. Each of these figure studies focuses on the “otherness” of the attire and features a plain backdrop to fill the rest of the canvas. These portraits are engaging, revealing an interest in life beyond Tolbert’s immediate world.

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In between teaching, organizing exhibitions, and exhibiting her own work, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert also became formally involved in politics during her time at Lander as she was elected South Carolina Republican National Committeewoman at the 1936 Republican Convention.48 Her father, Joseph “Tie-less” Tolbert, had served as the SC Republican National Chairman for decades.49 “Tie-less Joe” was a colorful figure, who represented the minority party in South Carolina, when, however, the Republicans were in a national majority rule. Because of this, Chairman Tolbert received many benefits for his party affiliation, including handling political patronages in South Carolina.50

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49 “‘Tieless Joe’ Will Retire, Niece Writes,” *The Greenville News* (Greenville, SC), Apr. 03, 1944. Joseph Tolbert’s nickname came from his aversion to ties. He had this to say: “I don’t bother with nothing I can do without.”
50 Jo Freeman, “Building a Base: Women in Local Party Politics,” in *Women, Gender, and Politics: A Reader*, ed. Mona Lena Krook and Sarah Childs (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 91. According to David Duncan Wallace in *South Carolina: A Short History*, Joe Tolbert would hold “court” on the big front porch of his wife’s house each Sunday for locals to come and if lucky, receive political appointments such as federal marshal or post office. Wallace reports long lines of carriages and wagons that would accumulate outside the house on these special Sunday afternoons. Tolbert was the leader of the Black-and-Tans branch of the Republican party, which was slowly being outnumbered in Southern states by the Lily-Whites. Read more in “Black-and-Tans vs. Lily-Whites:
It is somewhat unclear the extent to which Julia Elizabeth Tolbert desired her new role. Tolbert had always been close with her father, so she could have accepted the position out of a desire to please him. Reports state that Julia Elizabeth’s name was submitted just as the names of committee men and women were being announced, allowing for the further “Tolbertization” of the party. According to Walter Brown, staff correspondent for the Greenville News, Tieless Joe “made several efforts” in identifying another South Carolina woman to serve but was unsuccessful. Thus, her appointment seems almost like a last-minute effort to ensure that the candidate was loyal to Tieless Joe’s agenda.

Despite the fact that as of 1920, all American women had been granted the right to vote through the 19th Amendment, traditions and mindsets in the South did not change overnight. By the time Tolbert was elected, politics were still a men’s club, specifically a white man’s club. In an effort to get taken more seriously, women’s rights movements were often only welcoming to white women. This was true in South Carolina as well. At the statewide SC Republican party meeting in 1936, just a few months after her election, Julia Elizabeth welcomed eighty guests, reportedly all white and mostly female, with a short update on future meetings and plans. Though Tolbert was an advocate for an equal world, it seems she did not take a very provocative role as a Committeewoman. Instead, much of her work with the

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52 “Republicans of S.C. Hear Talk on Constitution,” The Greenville News (Greenville, SC), Sep. 18, 1936.
Republican party centered around attending conventions and organizing logistical information for the group, serving more as a supporting role. The title of National Committeewoman seemed to almost be an attempt to allow women into the party but with limited power.

Despite the fact that it is uncertain whether Tolbert actually pursued her position on her own accord or was just given it, it does seem that she enjoyed the role of being a state party leader and even obtained a certain level of independence beyond societal expectations. She reportedly attended a meeting of the National Republican Committee Women in Chicago in 1939 that was organized by Marion E. Martin, assistant chairmen of the RNC Women’s Division. Their goal was to unite the various independent women’s Republican clubs in order to have a larger presence in the party. Julia Elizabeth Tolbert also diverged at times from her father, asserting her own opinion instead. Many newspapers reported a split between the father-daughter pair in 1940 in the election for the location of the national convention. *The Baltimore Sun* reports that while Tieless Joe cast his vote for Chicago, “his daughter, Miss Julia Elizabeth Tolbert sang out ‘Philadelphia’ when her name was called.”

As S.C. Republican Committeewoman, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert was one of few women with political positions, allowing her to be on the threshold of change and once again demonstrating her unconventionality. Much like in her artistic pursuits, Tolbert’s political position allowed her a means of acquiring a certain measure of independence. With her progressive mindset and political activism, she was able to begin her work towards advocating for a more just world, which she would continue throughout her life. However, her sights remained fixed on art, at least for a while.

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54 “Quaker City Largely Indebted to Women for G.O.P. Conclave,” *The Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), Feb. 17, 1940.
Fig. 3.1: “Floral Fantasy,” Marie Chisholm, n.d., watercolor on paper, Courtesy of Mr. Kirk Taylor

Fig. 3.2: Untitled, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, n.d., watercolor on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 3.3: Sunday Morning at the Great House from the series A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties, Alice Ravenel Huger Smith, ca. 1935, watercolor on paper, Gibbes Museum of Art

Fig. 3.4: Sunlight and Shadows/Morning Sunlight, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1944, watercolor on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 3.5: “Wash Day,” Marie Chisholm, n.d., watercolor on paper, Courtesy of Mr. Kirk Taylor

Fig. 3.6: A Darky Cabin, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, n.d., oil on hardboard, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 3.7: Untitled, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, n.d., oil on hardboard, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection

Fig. 3.8: Untitled, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, n.d., pencil on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 3.9: *Country Road, Chester Springs*, Paul Wescott, 1929, oil on canvas, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts
Fig. 3.10: *Up An Alley*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1940, oil on canvas, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection

Fig. 3.11: Untitled, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, n.d., oil on hardboard, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 3.12: *Barns and Things*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1942, oil on hardboard, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection

Fig. 3.13: *The Goat Farm*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1942, oil on hardboard, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 3.14: *A Gypsy From Algiers*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1938, oil on canvas, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 3.15: Untitled, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, n.d., oil on canvas, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection

Fig. 3.16: Alpine Climber, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1938, oil on canvas, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
IV. AN ADVANCED PATH: Syracuse University

Through the guidance of Marie Chisholm and by attending artists colonies, exhibiting with South Carolina artist groups and participating in state and national politics, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert began to imagine and form a life of her own outside of Greenwood, S.C. As her mentor, Chisholm was Julia Elizabeth’s biggest artistic role model, and it seems that she advised Julia that if she wanted to continue pursuing art as more than a hobby, perhaps becoming an art instructor like Chisholm herself, she would need a formal degree in the Fine Arts.55 Thus, after she earned a certificate in art from Lander in 1937, Tolbert continued her path towards a formal artistic career by enrolling in a Bachelors in Fine Arts program at Syracuse University in Syracuse, New York. Between the years of 1937 and 1945, Julia Elizabeth split her time between Syracuse and Lander College, where she continued helping Chisholm with the Department of Art during her off periods.

At the time, the North was where the emerging art scenes and schools were located, so it was common for artists with some degree of means to leave the South for their artistic education.56 Though Tolbert could have earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Art at Lander where she’d already taken some classes, she pursued a larger program and more vibrant artistic communities by heading North. Once there, she was closer to big cities such as New York,

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55 Dr. Thomas Tolbert, email message, November 20, 2017
Philadelphia, and Boston and thus had greater access to museums and many artists who were experimenting with new styles.

Though her time at Syracuse is still not fully understood, Tolbert only took one semester of classes a year. It is unclear from her transcript the exact time of year that she took these classes, though *The Index-Journal* reported on her summer work at Syracuse on numerous occasions. In any case, the exact timing is not crucial to understanding the nature of her experience. At Syracuse, the classes she was offered were more advanced and challenged her in ways that she had not been at Lander. Many of her classes centered once again on the fundamentals of art, but were more focused on specifics such as composition, technique, and use of medium. In 1939, she took a course entitled, *Artistic Anatomy of Human Figures*, where she most likely got her first training on painting nude figures. Painting from nude models has long been central to the academic study of art, yet women artists were denied access to them up until the late nineteenth-century. Lander College would not have provided courses such as this to their all-female students due to the conservative nature of the South as well as the fact that it was a smaller, more limited program. In the Wofford Fine Arts Collection, many examples of Tolbert’s nude studies exist, and by looking at her transcripts, these examples can be dated to her years at Syracuse. While the female models are always entirely nude [Figure 4.1], the male models each feature a drape on

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57 The grades reported on her transcript are much lower than her grades at Lander and Columbia, suggesting more difficulty in classes.
their lower region, as shown in Figure 4.2. Even though Tolbert had access to nude models through life classes at Syracuse, there were still some gendered differences.

Syracuse not only provided her with a more rigorous artistic education but also with a chance to experience the North. She captured the industrial sides of the region in *Industrial Back, Syracuse, NY* [Figure 4.3], the only work labeled with the location of Syracuse and two works depicting rock quarries, which seem to be from this time as well [Figures 4.4 & 4.5]. As agricultural work was still the driving economic activity in the South, the fact that she chose to depict the industrial scene shows her interest in the differences between the two regions. In a Poster Design course, Julia Elizabeth created *Carolina* [Figure 4.6] and *Sheer Cotton* [Figure 4.7]. Both of these works share a similar theme of the South, with the large, iconic magnolia blossoms as well as the reference to cotton, which Tolbert’s family grew on their farm.

According to Dennison, while many successful Southern artists went North or to Europe to study, many also returned, often citing homesickness as the reason.\(^{58}\) The slow pace of the South was perhaps what called Julia Elizabeth back because upon her graduation from Syracuse with a B.F.A. with a specialty in painting, she immediately enrolled in the graduate program at the University of Georgia in Athens, G.A..

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Fig. 4.1: Untitled, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, n.d., oil on canvas, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 4.2: Untitled, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, n.d., oil on canvas, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 4.3: *Industrial Back Door, Syracuse, NY*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, n.d., pencil on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 4.4: *Quarry Colors*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1945, watercolor on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection

Fig. 4.5: *Granite Quarry*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, n.d., pencil on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 4.6: Carolina, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1944, tempera on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 4.7: *Sheer Cottons*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1944, tempera on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
V. DEVELOPMENT OF A MATURE STYLE: University of Georgia

While it seems Julia Elizabeth Tolbert wanted to return to the South, what exactly brought Julia Elizabeth to the University of Georgia in the Fall of 1945 is still unknown. However, it could have perhaps been a connection between one of the new University of Georgia Art Department staff members, Annie Holliday, and the PAFA Country School, which Holliday attended in 1932, just a few years before Tolbert.\(^59\) Though no known overlap between Tolbert and Holliday exists, Holliday was well-known and well-loved both in the Georgia community of Athens and in the PAFA Country School. If Tolbert desired to return to the South and continue her artistic education, she was perhaps referred to the University of Georgia by PAFA faculty who had known Holliday. Advanced art programs were not common in the South, and the University of Georgia department of art had recently earned a great reputation under the leadership and growth of Lamar Dodd. In the late 1940s, *Life* magazine reported it as “the best of its kind in the Southeast.”\(^60\)

At the end of World War II, the GI-Bill of 1944 enabled returning soldiers to enter colleges and universities to further their educations and be more competitive in a changing work environment.\(^61\) However, manufacturing was no longer as active as it was in war-time and there was no need to maintain a full-sized military. As many women had stepped up to fill jobs that had been left unoccupied by males enlisting or being drafted to the war, there were twice the number of potential employees searching for jobs after the war. This created a huge flood in the job market and less jobs to go around. Governmental financial incentives through the GI-Bill

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allowed many males returning from war to enroll in undergraduate and graduate programs in art. Artists such as Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg, and Ellsworth Kelly were among those to further their artistic educations with these benefits, which ultimately boosted their careers. As a greater percentage of the population entered higher education, these institutions expanded, and from this, university art departments did as well.⁶²

At the University of Georgia, the visual arts had not been a priority until the late 1920s when a Chair of Art position was created. As this point, the arts were still seen in the South as unimportant, even in an academic realm. At UGA, there were three art teachers spread out under three different departments; one in Agriculture, one in the Home Economics department, and the third attached to the School of Fine Arts. Societal views on gender were pivotal to this: women were expected to paint pictures, while men were expected to paint houses.⁶³ However, Harmon W. Caldwell, the University President at the time, recognized how it important it was to strengthen the fine arts program for the university’s chances of receiving a top-tier national ranking. It was with his support in the early 1930s that more classes were added to the catalog, and in the 1935-1936 school year, a formal Bachelor of Fine Arts program was introduced for both Art and Music majors. This also meant that they needed to find someone to be the head of the Department of Art. In Caldwell’s words, he foresaw a department head that was “a live, recognized artist doing actual creative work, who would interest all students with the value of understanding the arts and developing tastes so that this institution might serve more faithfully in influencing culturally the people of our state.”⁶⁴ In every way, Georgia-born artist Lamar Dodd

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⁶⁴ Eiland, 48
was the ideal candidate. After first serving as an artist-in-residence, Dodd was named the first head of the department in 1938, a position he would retain until his retirement in 1973. Under Dodd, the Department of Art thrived as it went through many periods of growth and change. In his first few years, Dodd enrolled nine students as art majors and set about raising the academic rigor by expanding the department and bringing in new instructors, including Alan Kuzmicki and Annie Holliday. He consolidated the professors into one unified program and introduced printmaking and ceramics to the department. Within just a few years, the department went from less than ten students to hundreds. In the 1940s, Dodd convinced the University that the department needed a permanent home and a new building was dedicated in 1941. He also hired a full-time curator, Alfred Heber Holbrook, and began a collection of art to further the artistic education of the students and the larger community of Athens. The growth of the department continued under Dodd’s leadership until it became one of the largest and most respected schools of art in the American South.

In addition, the attitudes of students changed over the years as they appeared more interested in the courses and the arts community. It seems that this had a lot to do with the nature of the faculty. Dodd set about hiring artists rather than teachers. He created an environment that was not just about teaching but about engaging with the arts. In this sense, Dodd and his unfailing enthusiasm for the arts had a profound impact on the school as a whole.

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65 From a very early age, Dodd displayed an inherent ability for the arts. At the age of 12, he was given special permission to take art classes at the LaGrange Female College, which had an excellent program in his town. As the arts were still considered a female specialty, most males in LaGrange did not have access to arts education, but in exchange for mowing the grass and cleaning blackboards, as well as other miscellaneous chores, Dodd was granted approval. After a brief but miserable stint at Georgia Tech for architecture, which served as an effort to discover a more suitable profession, Dodd realized that he wanted to pursue the arts professionally.

66 “History: Art at the University of Georgia,” Lamar Dodd School of Art, University of Georgia, https://art.uga.edu/node/662.

67 Eiland, 49

68 Over the years, with the guidance of Holbrook this collection would become the Georgia Museum of Art.

69 Eiland, 51
The student newspaper, *The Red and Black* reported after Dodd’s first full year, nearly every student had become “art conscious.”\(^70\) For almost forty years, Lamar Dodd was the driving force of the growth of the UGA Art Department. He was a passionate teacher, a lifelong learner, and was committed to the artistic development of all of his students, male and female.

Because of his involvement on every level of the department as well his habit of painting alongside his students, Lamar Dodd had a great impact on the style of his students’ art, including Julia Elizabeth Tolbert. Like Tolbert, Dodd left the South and went north to study. At the Art Students League, an informal, autonomous institution in New York, he trained with some of the most well-known artists of this period, including George Bridgman, George Luks, and John Steuart Curry.\(^71\) With World War II taking over Europe, New York was quickly becoming the cultural capital of the West. However, there was an apparent tension in the emerging trends in American art; while some artists embraced international modernism, others were not content leaving their American roots behind. The latter attitude became known as American Scene

\(^70\) Ibid, 51.
\(^71\) Ibid, 12
painting, a wide, encompassing term for artists who depicted ordinary aspects of American life and landscape in a naturalistic manner. The great champions of the American Scene, credited with pushing artistic taste in America toward recognizable subjects, were Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, and John Steuart Curry. Though it manifested itself differently for each artist, American scene painting became the predominant trend in America, at least for a little while. Regionalism, a term that came to embody the patriotic sense of the movement, gave definition to American art, forcing it to stand on its own rather than relying on European trends in style. Instead of style, subject matter was the unifying factor of Regionalist paintings, always depicting scenes that were characteristic of the lands that the artist lived in, with, or around.

As a budding and influential young artist, as well as his close contact with Curry and some of the other early American scene painters at the Art Students League in New York, Dodd incorporated the same ideas of a truly American subject matter into his art from this period and carried these ideas down to the South when he returned in 1933. However, while this movement was largely anti-modern, Dodd maintained a distinct perspective in his work by combining it with other trends. From some of his earliest days at the Art Students League, Dodd had worked with George Luks who introduced him to the Ashcan school. Much like American Scene painting, the Ashcan school formed out of a desire to reject contemporary trends towards impressionism and academic painting and instead express real, humble, and honest images of ordinary life. Robert Henri, one of the most prominent leaders of the informal group of Ashcan painters, coined the credo for the unofficial school, “art for life’s sake” as opposed to “art for art’s sake.” In subject matter, the Ashcan school focused on urban, everyday scenes and used

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72 Eiland, 28.
dark color palettes and loose, gestural brushwork to emphasize the grit and harsh reality of daily life.

Dodd also incorporated some of the compositional tools of modern styles. Learning from Charles Sheeler and his photographs of industrial sites, Dodd absorbed aspects of the precisionists, another informal group of artists in New York at the time. Emerging out of cubism and futurism, precisionists borrowed certain aspects from modern abstraction, such as a reliance on the pure elements of form, and combined them with American subject matter of landscapes and regional scenes to still maintain an identity as American artists.

The most distinctive factor, however, of Lamar Dodd’s personal style was the development of his own “scene” in the South. Though the arts have long been a part of Southern culture, William U. Eiland, renowned Dodd expert, points out that there was no distinct or established tradition in painting in the South at the time. Thus, Lamar Dodd became the unofficial leader of the newly emerging southern school when he returned to the South after studying in New York. In subject matter, Dodd’s work is rooted in the spirit of the south, largely centering around his home state of Georgia. A reviewer of his 1932 New York exhibition described his work as having “not one scene of the Scottish moors with their purple heather… not one scene of the fountains of Rome!... Nothing of Paris or London or Athens or Pompeii. But Georgia, Georgia, Georgia.” From rural landscapes to rocky seashores, Dodd drew from all aspects of life for his inspiration. Southern art emerged from the regionalist identity into its own genre, with three large themes surfacing: race, religion, and as Eiland so eloquently puts it “the

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74 Eiland, 24.
very earth itself on which the agricultural economy and society of the region depended.”

Southern artists desired to create art that shared the distinctiveness and character of the South with the rest of the world. Later in life, Dodd summed this up in regard to his own work and that of his students, saying “We strove to produce not just a sensational regional scene, but to revive an interest in the truth in things.”

The influence of Dodd was clear on Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, and her style shifts as a reflection of this during her time at the University of Georgia. She begins to incorporate a darker color palette, creates a thicker layer of impasto on her canvases, and places a strong emphasis on regional subject matter. One example of this is *Moving Day* [Figure 5.1], a 1946 work, completed during her first few years at UGA. In this work, she uses dark colors as a base for brighter layers of paint, which heightens the color contrasts and turbulent mood of the scene. Dodd’s influence is made more evident through more examples of her UGA master’s work, which will be discussed later in this paper. In addition to having a stylistic significance on Tolbert, Lamar Dodd also offered her many opportunities within the department to help her find her place and purpose at UGA, allowing her to grow as an artist.

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Julia Elizabeth first started at the University of Georgia as a graduate student after the completion of her B.F.A. from Syracuse, and in her second year, she was brought on as an instructor in a last-minute decision to fill in for Reuben Gambrell, which mirrors her quick transition from student to instructor during her time at Lander. Gambrell, another South Carolina native was the first student to earn his Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Georgia under Dodd in 1941 and served as a regular member of the staff for several years. He set the bar

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77 Eiland, 25
high for future students, going on to develop his own artistic career. However, Gambrell was drafted to serve in World War II and had to leave, creating a vacancy in the department that was not filled until Tolbert.\textsuperscript{78} In October of 1946, Tolbert was appointed by Dodd to serve as a temporary instructor for the semester. For $500 a semester, Tolbert taught twenty laboratory hours a week, as well as a beginner drawing class with Alan Kuzmicki, another successful Dodd protege. In a letter about departmental updates to a major donor Edward S. Shorter, Dodd reported that “Julia is doing a grand job in the department,” and Julia had expressed her satisfaction with the new position to Shorter as well.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Tolbert_first_row_middle_with_UGA_faculty_in_1950_Pandora_University_of_Georgia.jpg}
\caption{Tolbert (first row, middle) with UGA faculty in 1950, \textit{Pandora}, University of Georgia}
\end{figure}

For the 1947 school year, Julia Elizabeth was awarded a fellowship for her graduate studies and was also hired on once again as a faculty member for both the Fall and Spring semesters. This time, she was appointed not to assist but to fill the role of Kuzmicki in teaching the Drawing and Composition classes while he went off to study in New York. As Dodd was a

\textsuperscript{78} In a conversation with the author, April 19, 2018, Dr. Tolbert shared that Julia Elizabeth Tolbert and Gambrell dated at some point. Many of her family members even believed that they would get married, though this did not end up being the case.
great believer in the importance of drawing as both a preparatory step and as a complete work in
its own right, his choice to have Tolbert teach this course serves as a testament to his trust in her
artistic abilities.

For Tolbert, drawing was always an important artistic practice, ever since she was a
beginning artist at Lander, and over the years, her drawing style changes. While she tends not
to date her drawings until she is at UGA, the early, undated work shows much more control and
a higher level of finish. Overall, they seem more like images drawn from direct observations (see
Figure 5.2). On the contrary, her work that is dated after 1946 is more much more relaxed and
gestural, for example, The Roofs [Figure 5.3] a 1948 sketch for The Green Roof [Figure 5.4].
Here she employs sporadic, sketchy lines to form the composition, quite the contrast with the
meticulous shading and details from the previous example. Because The Roofs most likely served
entirely as a study, never intended for exhibition, this sketch feels intimate and informal. The
free and random pen lines that contrast with the ordered, symmetrical composition, capture more
movement and spontaneity than the oil version. In her master’s thesis, Tolbert states that
drawings are the first step in “the [artist’s] search for realization.” The simplification and
reliance on shape, line, and space reveal much about the artist’s skills, understanding, and
observation. In a sense, there is more truth to the artist’s original sketch than the finished
painting.

Julia Elizabeth Tolbert’s thoughts and habits involving drawing, which she was most
likely sharing with her classes, are extremely similar to that of her mentor, Lamar Dodd, as
shown in several examples. In a series, Dodd completed in the early 1940s, he created abstract
compositions of workers in Georgia cotton fields (see examples in Figure 5.5 & Figure 5.6).

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79 The Wofford College Fine Arts Collection has more than seventy drawings by Tolbert.
Merely suggesting figures, he utilized short, angular brushstrokes, which powerfully convey a sense of movement and the backbreaking labor that was involved with this task. These works were celebrated as successful, truly Southern images and were significant in making a national name for Lamar Dodd. Likewise, Tolbert created two works of a practically identical subject and executed in a similar approach, *Cotton Pickers* [Figure 5.7] and *They Pick* [Figure 5.8].

Distinctly Southern, it is unknown whether Tolbert created these works out in the fields or from a mental image or photograph. However, her two sketches feature blurs of abstracted figures reminiscent of Dodd’s. While the earlier *Cotton Pickers* contains slightly more defined workers created with more curved lines, *They Pick* is even more fragmented with sharp, pointed lines forming each of the distorted figures. Similarly to Dodd’s, both of these works are more expressive than documentary. The dynamic movement of the lines suggests the feelings of the activity that a naturalistic depiction would not capture.

During her time at UGA, Tolbert also experimented with ink and washes in her sketches, something Lamar Dodd incorporated as well and perhaps encouraged her to teach her students. For Dodd, sumi ink allowed him to emphasize the spatial relationships in his compositions, “to marry shape to space,” as represented in *Interior of a Room* [Figure 5.9], ca. 1952.\(^1\) Tolbert’s work [Figure 5.10], which features a woman in an art studio demonstrates this method as well. In this work, Julia Elizabeth incorporates washes to define the spaces of the room and the figures, creating varying tones to express volume and to differentiate surface texture. Tolbert sometimes experimented with ink and washes in other ways, as well, sometimes even forming entire compositions out of fluid strokes of ink. *Early Spring* [Figure 5.10], a 1950 work, demonstrates her experimentation and even seems to even draw inspiration from Japanese prints, which had ties to Southern art especially though the works of Alice Ravenel Huger Smith, who had

\(^{1}\) Eiland, 86
exhibited at Lander. Much like her mentor Lamar Dodd, drawing seems to have been an essential aspect of Tolbert’s artistic process, allowing her a place to experiment in style as well as in composition.\textsuperscript{82} The drawings dated during her time at the University of Georgia are especially free and expressive, which was perhaps due to her role as a drawing instructor. While teaching others the foundational skills, perhaps she found the confidence to no longer only focus on exact recreations but instead emphasize a more personal approach.\textsuperscript{83}

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In addition to teaching, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert helped Lamar Dodd with other tasks for the department. This ranged from helping with the yearly department auctions, in which students and faculty would donate work to be auctioned as a fundraiser for department, to doing demonstrations at Athens’ high schools. She also got a chance to put her original Bachelor’s Degree in English to good use by assisting Dodd with a variety of projects that required writing and communication skills. According to the artist’s nephew, Julia Elizabeth repeatedly shared the following anecdote with the family as an example of her role with the department.\textsuperscript{84} One year, Dodd was asked to write an entry on contemporary American art for an upcoming edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica. However, due to the time it would take to plan, write, edit, cite, and acquire necessary permission from artists, he assigned the task to Tolbert as his graduate student. When it was published, under his name, he was given a set of the encyclopedia, which he promptly gave to her as appreciation for her work. While the entry has not yet been located, this story is telling of the interpersonal dynamic between Tolbert and her mentor, professor, and employer, Lamar Dodd. If Dodd did truly pass this opportunity along to Tolbert, this meant that

\textsuperscript{82} Julia Elizabeth was described by her nephew as being thrifty, so drawing was also the cheapest way for her to experiment and plan her projects.  
\textsuperscript{83} Tolbert, “Athens in Picture Construction,” 50.  
\textsuperscript{84} Conversation with Mary Jo, transcribed by Dr. Tolbert in email message, April 17, 2015.
he had trust and confidence in her. Ever since her time at Lander, where she would host events solely with the purpose of encouraging art discussion, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert expressed a desire to ignite an excitement about art in others, so this exciting opportunity to be published would have allowed for her to do that on a nationwide level, although under another’s name.

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In addition to, and perhaps more important than her work as an instructor and faculty member of the Department of Art at UGA, Tolbert was pursuing her master’s in fine arts. The biggest requirement for this was completing a thesis. Tolbert’s thesis, which she completed in 1951 and had approved in 1952, was entitled, “Athens in Picture Construction.” This document expresses the impact that the UGA Art Department faculty and fellow students had on her, especially Lamar Dodd. From the very beginning, Tolbert acknowledges the support she received from Dodd. She states, “Of all the people who have assisted me in this undertaking of assembling and clarifying an interpretation of a particular vicinity, Athens, Georgia, Lamar Dodd has contributed most to the philosophy and point of view expressed. I wish to acknowledge my appreciation to him and for his generous help and encouragement.”85 For Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, these years at the University of Georgia were a culmination of her artistic pursuits, bringing

85 Tolbert, preface.
together years of formal training in the classroom and allowing her the freedom and confidence to finally express her own voice in art.

With the direct influence of Dodd and his distinct philosophies of art, a driving force behind Tolbert’s work was an intentional desire to instill a dual sense of personal experience and universality in her paintings. In her master’s thesis, “Athens in Picture Construction,” the artist explicitly states her intentions, expressing a significant desire to define art and life in her own terms and stressing the idea of individual approaches and personal interpretations. As this document provides some of the only glimpses of the artist’s own thoughts, “Athens in Picture Construction” serves as evidence of the growth and progression that led to her mature style of art. In looking closely at the work produced during the course of the thesis, Tolbert’s art is also representative of the larger realm of the developing school of Southern art, one that strives to be more than just ‘regional,’ but to be experienced by people from all over. Because of this, Tolbert’s art shows a deliberate focus on design, something she had not seemed to consider as thoughtfully in the past. Prior to UGA, her work was more literal, painted accurately from direct observation, but she begins to move away from this and towards art constructed in accordance with an intentional plan.

From the very beginning of her thesis, Tolbert emphasizes that her creative approach centers around the relationship between art and people; in fact, she explores this idea in two major ways. First, the artist takes on the community of Athens as her source material, breaking it down into three core subjects: its houses and streets, its trees and rocks, and its people. She believes that by choosing something one knows and knows well, an artist is able to capture it in such a truthful light that it becomes universal, thus breaking out of the narrow, regional category. In telling the story of Athens, a town in which she had spent the past few years studying,
working, and living, Tolbert incorporates people into her work based on the ways that they interact with the community. For example, Waiting [Figure 5.12] is a contour sketch completed in 1948 for a series of etchings entitled “Bus Stop,” in which she observed the commonplace activity of taking the bus. The simplification of this drawing seems to capture a brief moment of time that is characteristic of Athens while being something everyone can relate to.

The second way that the artist thinks about the relationship between art and people is through an explicit interest in the viewer, which becomes a recurring theme throughout her paper. A whole section in her introduction is devoted to the “Attitudes of the Public and the Painter,” where she explores the relationship between these two groups. Tolbert argues that because contemporary artists of her time are seeking new and original ways of expressing personal experience through visual works, it has become harder for the viewer, or “spectator” as she refers to them, to understand and appreciate this unfamiliar art. Tolbert does not question the communicative power of art, maintaining the belief that the visual language of art does not need to be clarified in words, but she instead believes that by unmasking and breaking down the creative development, the art product itself can unite viewer and artist. For Tolbert, experiences of art for viewer and artist are not separate but connected from the beginning to the end. Both are necessary for a work of art to fully fulfill its purpose. For this reason, she describes the procedures and techniques she employs throughout her thesis as a way of demonstrating her own understanding of the art process.

For example, Two Shoppers [Figures 5.13-5.16] is a series of four works that she uses in her thesis to illustrate the process of pictorial development. From a preliminary sketch to a final mixed-media painting, each version shows a small glimpse of the method and thought process of the artist in order to bridge the gap between themselves and the viewer. However, Tolbert does
include a disclaimer that this is not exactly how it always happens. For the purpose of her thesis, she imposed a certain order on her work to demonstrate the ideal progression, but in reality, artists may rearrange, reshape, or reimagine their original idea simultaneously as they work towards their final product.

In addition to laying out various versions as a method of reaching a point of understanding for the viewer, Tolbert also strives to demonstrate how the principles of art can be manipulated to affect visual experience. Intentional experimentation was a very important part of her thesis research, and she does this by researching and exploring new mediums of art including lithography and silk screening, as well as with new techniques for mediums she is already comfortable with. In *Two Shoppers*, she created a sketch, a watercolor, a mixed-media, and an encaustic. While she did not necessarily intend to have one work be the final piece, she was instead experimenting with various techniques and the basic elements of picture structure to understand how these things alter the meaning of a work of art and alter the viewing experience.

According to Tolbert, the viewing experience generally begins with an emotional response rather than an intellectual one. In another series, *Tall Trees* [Figures 5.17-5.20], she utilized multiple pen, ink, crayon, and pencil drawings to test out the effects they had. In both compositional form as well as through experimentation of mediums, Tolbert sought a work that captured the visual experience of being deep inside a forest. Playing with overlapping tree forms, interactions with the earth and environment, and feelings of color, she abstracted the trees in such a way that they are recognizable but not naturalistic. In *Forest Lights* [Figure 5.20], the emotional content is evoked through the eerie sense of space, color, and line. The trees form an interlocking pattern, which was not observed directly from nature but an element of Tolbert’s design, perhaps influenced by cubism. *Trees* [Figure 5.21], ca. 1953, by Lamar Dodd recalls an
almost identical scene and similar geometric abstraction of nature. Once again, the design is key in provoking personal expression as the organic shapes of nature are forced into verticals, horizontals, and diagonals. While Dodd uses looser brushwork and more naturalistic colors, Tolbert exploits color in an intentional and strategic manner, pushing the work almost into full fantasy.

Just as she uses form to her advantage in evoking certain reactions, Tolbert also reveals that she manipulates the subject itself to fulfill her goal of a closer connection with the viewer. This is shown through *Broad Street Corners* [Figure 5.25], a merging of four individual sketches (similar to Figures 5.22-5.24) to develop one painting. In an effort to emphasize the tower as the dominant subject, she incorporated storefronts from previous studies. By allowing these horizontal structures to surround the tower, its height was accentuated. Then, she created vertical repetitions by bringing in smoke stacks and taller buildings from additional sketches. Though not created from direct observation but intentional manipulation, this work is convincing in its depiction of an Athens street scene, yet it still maintains a universality for all viewers. Of this series, Julia reflects: “As I worked, I was aware of the fact that I was seeing, feeling, remembering, and inventing all at once in an effort to keep the painting progressing as a unit.”

In evaluating her art, Julia Elizabeth mentions several times throughout her thesis that she desires to explain the “reason for being” for her drawings and paintings. In this same sense, the “reason for being” for her graduate thesis is to unite artist and viewer, something she recognizes as an issue with modern art. She states, “Art does not belong in an ‘ivory tower.’ While not all of art is for everybody, some of art is for all people.” To make art that can be understood, and therefore more enjoyable for all viewers, she attempts to illustrate the process of creating a work

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86 Tolbert, 23.
of art. In doing this, she proves that by breaking down barriers, in this case, artistic decision-making, two alternative views can meet in the middle at a shared understanding. Art, which can and should be interpreted differently by everyone, can still be a common ground for all to stand on.

She concludes her thesis with this statement: “Art is not a conjuring word, but a word related to every phase of contemporary living. Creative activity in itself fills a very basic human need - a need for self-expression that all people feel…The creative attitude is progression, as art is progression, as life is progression.” With this statement, she expresses not just a desire for art but a need for art - as an outlet, as a purpose, and as a unifier. With her progressive social beliefs that often set her apart from her neighbors, art was what transcended these issues and helped her to find her place in the world.

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Unfortunately, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert’s University of Georgia thesis seems to have been the end of her artistic output. Though she had dealt with various physical ailments throughout her life, in her last few years at UGA, it grew more and more difficult for her to create art. Dr. Thomas Tolbert recalls: “Something happened to Julia Elizabeth Tolbert toward the end of her stay at UGA... When she was painting in a way that I would view as her most expressive period, she abruptly stopped painting, married with abrupt notice, and settled into a new chapter of being a productive and constructive player in the Cashiers community.” Though her medical history is largely unknown and the exact reasons for the end of her artistic career may never be certain, Dr. Tolbert, the artist’s nephew, has made some deductions on the physical, mental, and emotional struggles that colored this period of her life based on his own experiences with her.

87 Ibid, 46.
88 Ibid, 51.
89 Dr. Thomas Tolbert, email message, November 20, 2017.
Julia Elizabeth Tolbert began to develop tremors in her hands, which became so bad that she could barely hold a drawing utensil. *University Campus* [Figure 5.26] seems perhaps to show this issue due to the shaky, disorderly composition. More so than other examples, it suggests trembling and uncertainty due to sporadic pen lines. In post-World War II America, prescription medications were being distributed more widely than they had before, so Julia Elizabeth was prescribed medications to treat this condition, which were somewhat effective. In addition to tremors, Julia Elizabeth was reported to have increasing issues with her eyesight during the mid-1950s. She had worn prescription glasses, “thick, Coke-bottle types,” since she was a child, as seen in many photographs, but Dr. Tolbert believed that this got much worse during her years in Athens. This could have been due to a thyroid imbalance that caused degenerative myopia. About twenty years later, in 1970, she had cataract surgery, supposedly exclaiming that she’d never seen as clearly before, yet she still did not pick up art again.

Just a few years before the completion of her M.F.A. from the University of Georgia, Dr. Tolbert also reports that Julia Elizabeth underwent a fairly extensive surgery, a possible hysterectomy. Her surgery was performed in Greenwood county, and she recovered at the home of an aunt rather than her own immediate family, suggesting that she was not on the greatest terms with them at this period of her life. It takes an average of six weeks to recover from a surgery like this, so this would have greatly interrupted her artistic endeavors which she had not stopped pursuing since 1933. While she could have perhaps created from her bed, like Frida Kahlo after her bus accident, the apparent lack of familial support, both emotionally and artistically, would have made the whole recovery period difficult.

Grief was another factor that could have led to her halting her artistic production. In 1940, one of her most favorite uncles, Thomas Payne Tolbert, the man who built the Rock House

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90 Deduced from the cause of her death as a perforated colon and endometriosis as the result of an occult tumor
and collected the affidavits during the Phoenix Riot, died, and just six years later, her beloved father died as well. According to articles in *The Index-Journal*, Joseph Tolbert died due to injuries from being hit by a truck near his house; these articles also implied that this was perhaps not an accident. Julia Elizabeth had reportedly long struggled with not being accepted by the community of Ninety Six, so this information would have most likely made his death even more devastating.91 As distant as she was with her mother, Julia was close with her father, and with his death, she was left virtually unattached from her biological family after a long legal and financial debate over her father’s estate.92

91 Dr. Thomas Tolbert, email message, November 20, 2017.
92 Dr. Thomas Tolbert, email message, March 22, 2018.
Fig. 5.1: *Moving Day*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1946, oil on canvas, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 5.2: Untitled, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, n.d., pencil on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 5.3: *The Roofs*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1948, pen on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection

Fig. 5.4: *The Green Roof*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1949, oil on canvas, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 5.5: *From This Earth*, Lamar Dodd, 1945, oil on canvas, Morris Museum of Art

Fig. 5.6: *Sketch: Cotton Pickers*, Lamar Dodd, ca. 1942, dry brush ink on paper, Collection of C. L. Morehead, Jr.
Fig. 5.7: *Cotton Pickers*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1950, pen and ink on buff paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection

Fig. 5.8: *They Pick*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1951, pen and ink on buff paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 5.9: *Interior of a Room*, Lamar Dodd, ca. 1952, ink on paper, Collection of the Artist

Fig. 5.10: Untitled, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, n.d., pen and ink on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 5.11: *Early Spring*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1950, pen and ink on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 5.12: Waiting, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1948, pencil on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 5.13: *Two Shoppers*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1949, ink on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection

Fig. 5.14: *Two Shoppers*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1950, dry brush technique and watercolor on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection

Fig. 5.15: *Two Shoppers*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1950, mixed media on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection

Fig. 5.16: *Two Shoppers*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1950, encaustic on canvas, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 5.17: *Trees Along the Path*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1949, crayons on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection

Fig. 5.18: *Untitled*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, n.d., gouache on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection

Fig. 5.19: *Trees and Earth*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1950, lithography on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 5.20: *Forrest Lights*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, n.d., gouache on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 5.21: *Trees*, Lamar Dodd, ca. 1953, oil on canvas, Collection of C. L. Morehead, Jr.
Fig. 5.22: Along Broad Street, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1947, ink on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection

Fig. 5.23: Along Broad Street Tower, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1947, ink on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection

Fig. 5.24: Broad Street Facades, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1947, ink on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 5.25: *Street Corners*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1947, oil on canvas, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 5.26: *University Campus*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1950, pen and ink on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
VI. POST-ARTISTIC YEARS: Cashiers, NC

With the completion of her Masters, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert moved from Athens to Cashiers, North Carolina, where she had a tract of land and small cabin given to her by her Uncle Thomas, just five years before he died. It is not surprising that she would not have wanted to return to Ninety Six due to a long history of unhappy memories. Instead, the mountains offered fresh air and a place to retreat, which made it an ideal place for Julia to recover and reinvent herself. Not long after she moved there and had her Cashiers home renovated by her brother for the year-round temperature, she married William Alonzo McCall (1904-1975) in November of 1954, a local Cashiers man who worked in timber harvesting. The wedding was held in Ninety Six in her brother’s house with a homemade ivy and flower arbor in front of the fireplace in the living room. The ceremony was performed by a local Methodist minister that Julia knew well. Her sister in-law, Louise, prepared the food and Julia’s trousseau. However, while the wedding was lively, the marriage caused a great strain on Julia Elizabeth’s relationship with her family, especially her mother.

The elder Julia Elizabeth felt that her daughter was marrying someone who was beneath her due to their disparate backgrounds. In particular, Alonzo was not deemed acceptable because of his lack of education. Whereas Julia Elizabeth had three degrees and a certificate in art, it is not certain that he completed any schooling past the fourth grade. Alonzo also had multiple children from previous relationships, though the exact nature of these relationships is unknown. Alonzo was a mountain man, knowledgeable of the land and animals that he encountered and skilled at working with his hands. He was friendly and reportedly well-liked in Cashiers, but, as Alonzo was not embraced by her family, Julia Elizabeth began to limit her visits back to Ninety Six. However, Julia’s sister in-law Louise was one of Alonzo’s biggest supporters. Her husband, 

93 After her death, the cabin and land were sold to the High Hampton Golf Course; the house was razed shortly after.
Julia’s brother, was always their mother Julia Elizabeth DeLoach Tolbert’s favorite, which meant he was naturally inclined to agree with her. However, this did not stop Louise from trying to make Alonzo feel welcome. She also allowed her two boys, Joseph and Tom, to spend time in Cashiers with them. Dr. Thomas Tolbert recalls that despite the negative impact of the marriage on her relationship with her family, it does seem that Julia Elizabeth was quite happy with Alonzo. The fresh mountain air provided a more peaceful environment for Julia Elizabeth. He remembers going on long hikes through the mountains, carving wood with Alonzo, and lots of light-hearted teasing.

Despite the physical limitations that seemed to have put an end to her artistic output, Tolbert once again found a way to create a life for herself. In the mid-1950s, she began to work for the Cashiers Public School System as a fifth-grade teacher. Though she did not have a formal degree in teaching, she petitioned for a certificate and a salary raise by sending her transcripts. Since she attended five different colleges and universities and earned three degrees and one certificate of art, she was more than qualified. Tolbert also had many years of experience in the front of the classroom from her early opportunities given by Marie Chisholm at Lander College, whom she maintained contact with throughout the years, as well as more recently at the University of Georgia. In a letter from March 22, 1955, during Tolbert’s attempts to gather her transcripts, Chisholm expresses her surprise that Tolbert is now teaching such young students as well as her astonishment for her marriage. It seems as if Marie is surprised that Tolbert had abandoned her pursuits for a professional artistic career for a more conventional life.

Though little information remains from her life in Cashiers, the artist’s nephew confirms that it was never dull. Staying true to her rebellious nature, Julia Elizabeth, who was always quite thin, supposedly attempted to deter the cold weather by wearing pants to school one day.
However, pants were not deemed socially acceptable for women in this community and this day in age, and she faced much backlash from parents. Knowing that the administration was not happy and that her time was coming to an end, Tolbert resigned. Dr. Tolbert reports that she knew a lost cause when she saw one and decided that she was “saving the principal the thankless task of compelling local parents to change their ‘Bible-based’ views.”

Dr. Tolbert also remembers that “years later, at Julia Elizabeth’s funeral, one of her friends from the Cashiers community composed and read a poem as a eulogy. The theme of that poem was that Julia Elizabeth was a giving and caring person who accepted and befriended people at all levels of means and education – but was essentially “different” in a positive way that was not understood by some. The title of the poem was ‘The woman who wore pants.’”

As her public-school teaching career did not pan out, Tolbert filled her time in other ways. According to her nephew, she became a geneticist at a mink farm, a dahlia hybridizer, and kept herself busy teaching, working, and volunteering with the marginalized people in the community.

Julia Elizabeth Tolbert (left) at the baptism of her great-nephew, Joseph M. Tolbert, 1978, Courtesy of Dr. Thomas Tolbert

Tolbert, who had been an active member of St. Paul Methodist Church in Ninety Six, also became involved in the Cashiers United Methodist Church, though she left her official membership at her home church

94 Dr. Thomas Tolbert, email message, March 31, 2015.
of St. Paul’s. Alonzo was also a member, and together, they participated in various activities, like the Lion’s Club and Auxiliary. As Alonzo was skillful in repairing things as well as cooking for the Church’s fish-fries and Julia Elizabeth was generous with her time and kindness, they found a welcoming community within the Methodist church.

At some point Tolbert and Alonzo moved back to Ninety Six to live with family. Julia’s mother died in 1963, and Alonzo died in 1975 from a sudden coronary after a progressing decline in his health. Though her later years did not produce art, Julia exhibited artwork at the Ninety Six High School in 1970, with help and encouraging from her extended family. Art is not something one ever leaves entirely behind, so this instance perhaps suggests that she had not lost her passion for art.
VII. CONCLUSION

Even after increasing visual and physical problems forced her to end her artistic pursuits, Tolbert maintained her precocious spirit, continuing to support the profound changes happening in the education systems, art worlds, and society. Towards the end of her artistic career, during her time at the University of Georgia, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert began to paint and draw trees like she never had before. Prior to this period, she included big green trees in many of her landscape paintings, but she begins to change. Instead, she seems to become fascinated with dead, gnarled, desolate trees. Sometimes the trees are a part of a larger composition, like in *The Lonely Group* [Figure 7.1], where the twisted tree serves as almost an interruption to the viewer. Other times, the focus is on the trees, like in *Fairest Forms* [Figure 7.2] or *Trees Against the Sky* [Figure 7.3]. Occasionally, they are not completely dead but feature just a few leaves, like in *Sooty Trees* [Figure 7.4]. However, what is repeated most frequently is the motif of one lone tree. Always bare and always contorted, the lone tree seems to become symbolic, perhaps serving as a representation of Tolbert’s inner self. As someone who had endured much grief and pain throughout her life, she had become withdrawn, her personality dependent on who was in the

room. For more than twenty years, art had been a way for her to express herself without having to tolerate much personal criticism from others, but as her tremor increased, the ending to her artistic career seemed to be fast approaching. Perhaps, the future, like the lone tree, seemed bleak and uncertain.
Fig. 7.1: *The Lonely Group*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1946, oil on hardboard, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 7.2: *Fairest Forms*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1948, ink wash on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection

Fig. 7.3: *Trees Against the Sky*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1950, oil on canvas, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
Fig. 7.4: *Sooty Trees*, Julia Elizabeth Tolbert, 1949, ink wash on paper, Gift of the Tolbert Family, Wofford Fine Arts Collection
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