



Marie-Claire Blais, close friend of Mary Meigs

An attempt to arrest time

Lily Briscoe: A Self-Portrait
An Autobiography by Mary Meigs
Talonbooks; 1981

by Dale Lakevold

"Homosexuals live more than others in the shadow of threat. We have committed a crime that has been condemned for thousands of years. Our answer has been to deny it. We lead double lives; we are hated (if recognized) and then judged for hating ourselves. We are judged for reacting bitterly to the unbearable weight of guilt that has been put upon us. The most beautiful and loving experiences of our lives have to be kept secret; and the lies we live make us wary and cold."

— Mary Meigs

Mary Meigs recalls the force of that initial question. Her friend, the literary critic Edmund Wilson, asks her in an offhand way: "You're really a sort of lesbian, aren't you?" Something black and faceless arose before Mary. She felt suffocated; she denied the question: "I wouldn't say that." She left Edmund's house and suffered through an intolerable, sleepless night.

Mary was living with a woman at that time, but she had not admitted her Lesbianism (even to herself) with what she calls "the proper conviction."

"It is the work of a lifetime to recognize life's prisons," Meigs writes at age 61 in *Lily Briscoe: A Self-Portrait*.

In her autobiography her life merges with the fictional life of Lily Briscoe, the painter in Virginia Woolfe's *To the Lighthouse*. Meigs, like Lily, succeeds in "arresting time." Meigs presents her memory as a vision which will not accept the enclosure of life's prisons, or time.

Meigs might have relented to her childhood "inheritance," which fatefully demanded more because she was born a girl. She lived a sheltered and sexless childhood. Her family was Christian, affluent, "nice" and stifling. In short, Meigs was expected to follow the proper family design.

Yet, she veered from her family's (and society's) expectations, and she chose "to listen to (her) own voices." She vowed to not marry, and to set forward on her two lifelong tasks: to become an artist, and to overcome her shame. Her decisions left her vulnerable to the patriarchal oppression which has burdened and demeaned women through time.

"To live with choices imposed by other people is one of my many ideas of imprisonment, the outward and visible kind. I think of Blake and his "mind-forged manacles." Blake's cry was for freedom

now (though not for women); women, who put on mind-forged manacles as soon as they are born, are thought not to feel the weight of convention as much as men."

Meigs does not claim to be a voice for all women and all Lesbian women ("Finally, I can only speak authoritatively for myself...."), but *Lily Briscoe* rings with convictions which could be applied universally.

Her guilt arising from her Lesbianism, her shame and self-deprecation as a woman artist, and her solitude within a repressed and unwavering Christian family lead you to see that women and homosexuals everywhere (and invariably) face a lifetime of imprisonment.

"I am lucky....to escape," writes Meigs. *Lily Briscoe* itself is a release for Mary Meigs. She creates her self-portrait intimately — as a letter from a friend might be. Each chapter works as a whole. If you could make her book a painting, you would find her friends, family and lovers, her art, letters, her love for birds, plants and the earth, clustered within her own image. Perhaps her book comes closer to realizing her canvas self-portrait which always eluded her.

More than anything else, Meigs' friendships with Barbara Deming and Marie-Claire Blais give Meigs "the most solid reality of life." Deming, who is both an activist and a writer, affirms the elements of earth, and a hopeful communion of women and men. "If men don't become more like women, they will destroy our planet," says Deming. For Canadian writer Blais, the most important quality of life which affected Meigs, is her *coeur*. When Meigs first met Blais, she recalls, "I felt the years dropping off and wings seeming to grow from my heels and shoulders."

Equally as liberating is Meigs' ultimate outpouring — the revelation of her homosexuality to her twin sister Hester. "The end of silence for a homosexual, even if it is ended by the breaking loose of anger, is such an inebriating experience that it is worth the pain of being out in the open."

Lily Briscoe traces one woman's awareness and acceptance of her self, through her "alternations of hope and despair." Mary Meigs makes important and wise observations about love and primitive emotions, about homosexuality, about women, about art, and about a white, Christian, male-dominated society.

But *Lily Briscoe* is not so much an analysis of society, as it is a detailed and careful study of one woman's lifelong task of release. Meigs cannot be faulted for using her will "to make her own life," because in that, she succeeds in arresting the lives of others.

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