

1910–1993



Elizabeth Layton was the daughter of a newspaper publisher in Wellsville, Kansas. A mother to five children, she was a journalist and creative writer who, following her father's death, served as the manager of the newspaper. For 30 years, however, she suffered from severe bouts of manic-depression.

After the death of her youngest son in 1976, she spiraled into a crippling despair. At her sister's suggestion, she took a drawing course at the age of 68. "It was a desperate, last-ditch effort to bring purpose to her older years," noted Don Lambert, her friend and publisher.

When she learned about "blind contour drawing"—staring at the outline of an object while drawing a methodical, continuous line—she ran with it. Holding a small mirror, Elizabeth produced numerous self-portraits in various incarnations, such as mother, social activist, homemaker, goddess: personas both real and imagined. Her work reflects the process of aging without apology or disclaimer (figure 26). She also addressed global issues such as AIDS, Alzheimer's, censorship, hunger, and race with a multifaceted sense of the comedic/tragic (figure 27).

Her intelligence and talent gained her national recognition, and her work toured the country. Hank Burchard nicknamed her "Grandma Moses on Tabasco sauce" in the *Washington Post*. In 1987, Elizabeth's work was shown at the National Museum for Women in the Arts in Washington, and the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American Art exhibited it the same year. Now the majority of her work is housed at the Lawrence Arts Center in Lawrence, Kansas.

In essence, her willingness to reveal her true voice saved her life. In a 1992 article in *USA Today* by David Zimmerman, she denied understanding why her mental health was so dramatically affected by her artwork. "I don't really have anything to say about what goes onto the paper ... My theory is that what I do is draw my feelings as I see them in the mirror, from the eye through the brain and down the arm and out the hand."

—Katherine Aimone



figure 26

Elizabeth Layton
Skipping Down Christo's Walkway, 1978
Colored pencil and crayon on paper

28 x 22 inches (71.1 x 59.9 cm)

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Gift of Elizabeth Layton in honor of the sustaining members of the Junior League of Kansas City, Missouri, Inc., F81-17.
Photograph by Robert Newcombe.

I WAS DEEPLY DEPRESSED, BUT THAT WAS INSIDE ME ...
I STARTED DRAWING, AND STARTED LIKING MYSELF BETTER.



figure 27

Elizabeth Layton
Buttons, 1982
Crayons and colored pencils

22 x 30 inches (55.9 x 76.2 cm)

Courtesy of Don Lambert