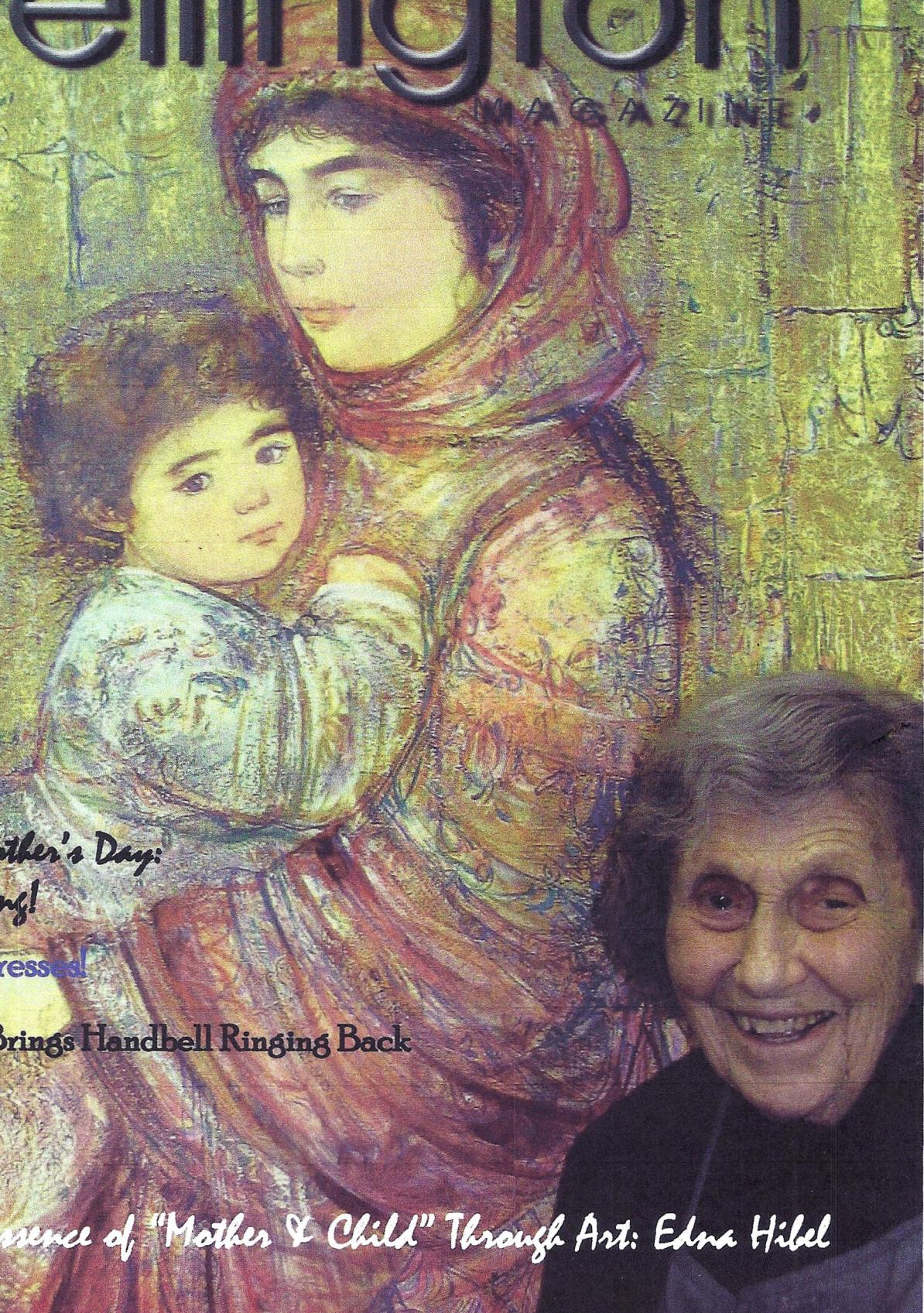


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Capturing the Essence of "Mother & Child" Through Art: Edna Hibel

# Edna Hibel: Capturing the Essence of Mother & Child Through Art

Story and Photos by Krista Martinelli



Prolific and personable artist Edna Hibel displays one of her lithographs in her studio

Edna Hibel is internationally known for her oil paintings, her lithographs and her watercolors. Her art work has been made into collectible plates, soaps, post cards and other forms. Most of all, she is known and loved for her classic depiction of the loving "mother and child."

Now at ninety years old, Hibel has not slowed down in any recognizable way. She keeps up her regimen of painting every day from 5am to 5pm. Her Singer Island home studio is filled with over thirty canvases in progress.

What got Hibel started on the mother and child paintings? She spent a year in Mexico in 1939 on a fellowship, which would have originally led her to Europe, but World War II broke out and led her to Mexico instead.

"I was fascinated to see how the mothers and babies never separated in Mexico," recalls Hibel. "Whatever the mothers were doing—washing, cooking, or in anything they did, they had their babies on their backs, sometimes in front."

Soon after, in 1940, Hibel got married and then had her first of three sons in 1941. She was immersed in the world of motherhood and continued to paint the mother and child image.

Today she lives with her husband (of 67 years) Tod Plotkin. Her three sons live in Palm Beach Gardens, New York, and one divides his time between Delray and Boston. She is the proud grandmother of seven grandchildren and one great grandchild.

Hibel is grateful to her parents for the way they shaped her life.

"Every person should have a mother and a father like I did," says Hibel.

Her mother had a zest for life and was impulsive when it came to her hobbies. She surprised everyone by buying 40 greyhound dogs after never really discussing this idea with the family. She befriended a savvy, young dog trainer and

together they prepared the 40 dogs for racing. In two short years, Hibel's mother became the top race dog winner in Miami Beach and Boston. Whatever she pursued, she pursued feverishly.

However, when Hibel's father died of cancer at the age of 60, her mother just "wanted to give up." In 1959, she gave up the race dog business and went into a deep depression, leaving behind any signs of her former self. Meanwhile, the family business was failing, the Hibels were headed for financial crisis and Edna Hibel wanted to find a way to make money for her family. She began teaching art lessons at \$2 per lesson and started selling some of her art.

Hibel and her family looked for any idea they could find to cheer up their mother, who was still battling with depression. And this is how Hibel's art career was launched. In 1961, without a real financial backing to make it happen, they decided to take a risk and buy an art gallery in Rockport, Massachusetts with the main purpose of letting their mother "be a charming hostess." The plan was for Hibel's mother Lena to get out of her rut and sell Edna Hibel's paintings to the public.

"We were surprised to see how big the gallery was when we visited it," says Hibel. It was previously a supermarket and Hibel remembers having to scramble to somehow fill up the space with enough artwork. She even had to borrow some paintings from people she had sold them to. She priced her paintings at \$25 to \$250.

"I'm not going to have the nerve to ask those prices," her mother protested. The issue of how to price Hibel's artwork faded away on day two of the art gallery's opening. Clayton and Ethelbelle Craig walked in and bought five paintings. They were charmed by Edna's mother, who gave them their first look at the paintings. It was the start of a beautiful friendship between the Craigs and the Hibels. From 1960 to 1978, the Craigs bought 180 paintings and 200 lithographs from Hibel. The Craigs went on to found the Edna Hibel Museum in Palm Beach, which moved to Jupiter five years ago.

As Chairman of the Board of the First Church of Christian

Science in Boston, Clayton Craig shared his love of the artwork with many of his peers. Alan Young, a fellow Christian Scientist, and actor on the TV series "Mr. Ed" was one of them. Another was Ginger Rogers, who Hibel painted a portrait of. Hibel's artwork spread like wildfire. "Clayton Craig at the time, was like the Pope of the Christian Scientists," says Hibel, who is Jewish and has always had an interest in many different faiths. The Craigs spread the word about Hibel's artwork to all of their wealthy, influential friends. With a combination of talent and luck, the art gallery plan worked, from cheering up Hibel's mother to successfully selling artwork.



New Baby, Oil; 1967

Hibel's mother turned into an amazing salesperson, forgetting about her depression and selling every painting in the gallery that Edna put on the walls. Hibel's mother lived to the age of 90, getting a second wind from the excitement of the art world.

From day two of the gallery opening, Hibel sold about one painting a day. She was shocked at the time to hear a statistic—less than 2% of artists can make a full-time career with their art. Hibel felt blessed to be one of the very few actually making a living through her art. Strangely enough, the Craigs, who were the biggest fans of Hibel's artwork, did not want to meet Edna Hibel herself. They were very appreciative of the qualities that they saw in the many paintings they had collected but had found, over time, that it was always disappointing to meet the artist.

As her biographer Shawn McAllister begins in his 2006 book *The Life & Art of Edna Hibel*, "Quite often artists who are revered for their art embody tortured souls or are eccentric individuals...not so in the case of Edna Hibel." He goes on to say that everyone who meets Hibel is impressed by her friendliness and becomes even more enamored with her art.

After a couple of years, due to the logistics of an upcoming event, the Craigs needed to visit Hibel's home to pick up some paintings. They were reluctant to meet Edna Hibel, but as soon as they did, she insisted that they stay for dinner. They ended up chatting away until 10pm. Ethelbelle Craig called Hibel the next day to thank her. She said that she had a home filled with many of the finest furnishings and artwork, but she confessed to Hibel, "I would give everything we have in this house away to get the feeling that you have in your house."

Perhaps it's Hibel's outlook on the nature of people that makes her so loveable. "I feel the human being is divine. Just to be alive, how could you not feel that the world is fantastic?"

At one point in her life, after being in Mexico, she had a stomach illness for an entire year that kept her in bed.

"I said to myself 'If I ever get under that blue sky again, I'm going to appreciate it!" says Hibel.

Hibel leads a happy and incredibly productive life as an artist from her home in Singer Island, where she has lived for the past 37 years.

**Continues on page 24**



At the age of 90, the world-renowned Hibel continues to paint, 12 hours a day.

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## **Edna Hibel (Continued from page 17)**

Hibel was the second woman and the second American to receive the Leonardo Da Vinci World Award of Arts, which she received in Holland in 2001. The award is given only every three years, and it's the one Hibel is most proud of.

"It's kind of like getting the Nobel Peace Prize in art," smiles Hibel. She's also received six honorary doctorates, including one in Costa Rica which honored her for her promotion of world peace.

"I'm always preaching peace in my paintings," says Hibel.

Despite all of the acclaim, Hibel remains humble.

"I still feel when I do these paintings, that no one else will love them except me," she admits. But then again, she reasons, all of the paintings sell (every single one of them), so others must love them too.

Hibel has spent as long as 23 years on one painting and has also produced a painting as quickly as in one day.



**Sky's The Limit**

"I work on paintings until it's the best I can do and I love it," says Hibel. When she gets to the point of loving it, it's finished.

Her biggest challenge in her artwork is to constantly strive toward a better work.

"I always think that the next one will be better. You always have to hope for that."

Hibel has been influenced by many of the great artists including Renoir, Van Gogh, Monet and Rembrandt. She appreciates the early Renaissance artists (before oil painting) like Giotto's frescoes. She's also been influenced by Piero della Francesca and Leonardo DaVinci. Most often, her fans point to parallels in Renoir's paintings and Mary Cassatt's etchings.

When it comes to media, Hibel enjoys working with oils, watercolors and lithographs. She's enjoyed going to Zurich, Switzerland 2 to 3 times each year for the past 27 years to create lithographs, utilizing large, smooth blocks of stone. Stone lithography is an old art form, in which the artist draws each separate color on a different stone, then makes the stones match up perfectly. The stones are then used to generate the final image on acid-free rag or japon papers. Hibel creates the image directly on the stone as she works, often changing colors throughout the process as the lithograph is being produced, causing the image to be produced in very limited edition lithographs.

Her favorite painting among her vast collection?

"I usually like the most recent one that I did," says Hibel.

Hibel has been asked to do portraits, but she's happier doing what she does most often—"inspiration pieces." Portraits, according to Hibel, have so many problems to solve. One of the biggest issues with portrait paintings is the desire to make your subject happy. This doesn't always mean making the portrait accurate, according to Hibel.

"I'd rather make myself happy," says Hibel.

She has lost track of how many paintings she's produced—there are thousands of Hibel paintings throughout the world.

"I would love to go visit them (the paintings), where they are," says Hibel, who's quite fond of and accustomed to travel.

She's been jet setting quite a bit lately with book signings and exhibitions in far away places.

"Now I know what one-night-stands are," jokes Hibel, who has done a lot of recent one-night trips.

How does Hibel keep up her amazing pace as an artist?

She tries not to have "too much of a social life." She says she's getting better at saying "no" to social engagements. She tries to stick to the plan of painting from 5am to 5pm. In the evenings, she and her husband Tod tend to read, watch old movies or have discussions about the art world.

However, Hibel has to strive for quiet evenings at home, as she gets plenty of social invitations and loves socializing. At the Edna Hibel Museum in Jupiter, Hibel loves to visit with people during their monthly lecture and tea. She tends to go from table to table, personally getting to know every one of her admirers.

"Isn't she amazing?" says Museum Director Nancy Walls.

"I guess I must think so, since I've stayed with her for nineteen years!"

The next Edna Hibel Museum Tea is planned for Monday, May 21st at 2pm, located at the museum in Jupiter on the FAU campus, right next to Roger Dean Stadium. Also on the 21st, a short talk will be presented, 'How to Grow Orchids and Enjoy Them' by Ann Carlson, the Orchid Lady.

For more information, go to [www.HibelMuseum.org](http://www.HibelMuseum.org) or call 561-622-5560 to reserve your seat. Hibel's biography by Shawn McAllister, a coffee-table sized book with her paintings and family photos, can be ordered from the website as well.



**Hibel signs books after an afternoon tea, held once a month at the Edna Hibel Museum in Jupiter**