

Suellen Rocca

1943-2020

Suellen Rocca was a close collaborator and friend of the Elmhurst Art Museum. The Elmhurst College curator was part of the widely recognized exhibition group the 'Hairy Who'. In 2018, the museum honored her with an award that read, "in grateful appreciation for your outstanding service as an artist, curator, educator, and creative leader in the western suburbs."

Recent tributes have been seen in the [New York Times](#), Chicago Tribune, Artforum, and more.



Suellen Rocca.
Photo: Bob Coscarelli Photography
Courtesy of Elmhurst College.



Suellen Rocca
Photographer: Jim Nutt and Gladys Nilsson.
Image Courtesy of Suellen Rocca.

As curator and director of exhibitions at Elmhurst College since 2006, Rocca oversaw the College's collection of Chicago Imagist and Abstractionist Art. The collection has enjoyed greater visibility and critical notice recently, largely due to Rocca's efforts. In just the past few years, paintings from the collection have traveled to New York City, São Paulo, Milan, London, Glasgow and other cities.

The collection includes several works by Rocca and other members of the Hairy Who, a visionary artists group formed in Chicago in 1966 and known for their vibrant, graphic, gleefully insubordinate and often weirdly humorous works. In 2018, the Art Institute of Chicago honored the group with a retrospective exhibition of their work, which Rocca described as the achievement of a lifetime.

But “teaching from the collection,” and insisting that the art remain accessible to Elmhurst College students, was always a priority for Rocca. One of her first major roles at the College was to painstakingly reinstall the art collection on the walls of the A.C. Buehler Library after it had undergone an extensive renovation in the early 2000s.



Suellen Rocca, *Passed*, 1988, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Elmhurst College Art Collection.

“She really made sense of the art programmatically so that she could then conduct tours and teach out of it—she had an intellectual reason for everything,” recalled Susan Swords Steffen, retired director of the library.

“Suellen was as excited to share the collection with our students as she was with the most acclaimed galleries in Europe,” said President Troy D. VanAken. “We will greatly miss her expertise and dedication to one of Elmhurst College’s most distinctive features.”

Rocca taught in the art department at the College for many years, and was a mentor to generations of students through critiques and discussion, said Mary Lou Stewart, an art professor and former department chair at the College. “Suellen took the creating of art very seriously, and she was always eager to talk to students and alumni about their work,” she said.

Rocca also was active in the local community. As a member of the City of Elmhurst's Public Arts Commission, she contributed her insight and expertise on public art awareness and beautification efforts for the city.

She also has collaborated frequently with the Elmhurst Art Museum, most recently on an exhibition featuring artist and former Elmhurst College Curator Sandra Jorgensen. In 2018, the art museum recognized Rocca for her outstanding service as an artist, curator and educator in the western suburbs.

In his remarks, Executive Director John McKinnon said: "Many artists exhibit their work, few exhibit their work internationally, and even rarer still are those that get critical attention by experts from the top curators, museums, galleries and critics around the world. Suellen is a part of that very small, very select group that has been entered into history books."



2018 Soiree at Elmhurst Art Museum, honoring Suellen Rocca, with Executive Director John McKinnon



Rocca's own works have been widely exhibited and are a part of many prestigious collections, including the Art Institute of Chicago; the Whitney Museum of American Art; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago; the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

In 2016, Rocca returned to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she earned her bachelor's degree in 1964, to accept an honorary doctorate of fine art.

Elmhurst College, press release,
March 20, 2020

Recent Tributes:

[New York Times, Suellen Rocca, 1943-2020, April 4, 2020](#)

[Artforum, Suellen Rocca, 1943-2020, March 31, 2020](#)

Suellen Rocca, *Palm Tree Landscape*, c. 1969, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Evelyn and Larry Aronson Collection.



Suellen Rocca

Curator and Director of Exhibitions
Elmhurst College

[Watch Suellen Rocca discuss the Elmhurst College Collection](#)



WTTW Chicago

Enjoy this interview with the artist/curator Suellen Rocca and others

The Weird and Fanciful Art of The Hairy
Who



Documentary

Hairy Who and The Chicago Imagists
(2014)

[Click here to watch](#)