

# Profile Maya Chabrol Starr: Celebrating Nature's Beauty With A Brush

BY LINDA DORMONT

The art of Maya Chabrol Starr could be added to a list of fine French imports. Like delicate perfume or perfectly aged wine, her paintings celebrate the pleasurable things in life.

"My theme is rebirth," says the slim, delicate-featured artist with the Leslie Caron accent. "I paint the joys of rebirth that come after Winter, after sadness. I am enchanted by the recycling of all nature."

Her canvases, which adorn the walls of her Colonial-style home in Merion, glow with the luminous colors of Spring. Pinks, blues and yellow-greens abound.

"Green is the color of hope, a symbol of rebirth, the major color of nature," she explains with Gallic enthusiasm.

The artist was born in Paris in 1940. Her mother was from northern Italy, her father from the south of France. "My joy in life is from my parents," she says.

A talent for working with her hands led to the Ecole des Arts Appliques in Paris, where she received a diploma in fine and applied arts in 1952. Then came an introduction to her future husband, Stuart Starr, an American who is now an associate professor of infectious diseases in the pediatric department of the University of Pennsylvania Medical School. Romance led to a visit to the United States, marriage in 1967 and life in a new country.

"When I first came to America, I worked as a children's book illustrator," she says. "I went on to *Women's Day* in New York, where I was the artist for a 'how to do it' column. We would show people how to reupholster an old chair, for example, or make a doll."

In the early 70s, she followed her physician husband to Atlanta, Ga., but could not find work in her field.

"I am grateful we moved to Atlanta," she says, "because it forced me to go into business for myself."

Working from home, she marketed her own hand-painted silk fabrics. It became a very successful enterprise, employing three other women



to fill orders. Architects and fine stores such as Neiman-Marcus were her clients.

In 1978, settled in Merion and encouraged by her husband, she turned to what had always been her dream: life as a full-time artist.

"My early paintings were narrative," she says, "rather like my book illustrations. I have also been influenced by the Surrealists and the artists of the 1920s and 30s."

In the last decade — during which time she has exhibited her paintings throughout the Eastern U.S. — her work has evolved and matured.

"I work from preconceived ideas," she says, "I have a wonderful memory for the lines and colors of nature. I sketch with my mind when I am outdoors, then I rework those images through my fantasy in my studio."

Her studio is a second-floor room in her house, where there is ample Northern light. Her oils are arranged in neat rows, as she learned in school. She sketches her ideas on paper, enlarges her sketches and transfers them to canvas. Finally, she fills in her colors — all those pinks and greens.

Her paintings show great variety. Common to many are sensuous female and plant forms. "I paint as a woman, using my female experience," she says.

The blending of human and vegetative shapes is a constant in her work. "I see all the creatures of the earth as a continuum of nature," she says. "Everything that exists partakes of preexisting life that has flourished on this planet for billions of years. That is my central vision, and it is a joyous one."

Maya Starr has exhibited locally at the Galerie Duchesne in Bryn Mawr, the Langman Gallery in Jenkintown and the University of Pennsylvania Faculty Club.

She also has found time to research the life of another artist: scientist Louis Pasteur. "It has been a secret for many years that the young Pasteur was a fine portrait painter," she says. Starr has lectured on Pasteur's artistic life, and she is currently working on a book on the subject.