

2115 Coates Street,
Dubuque, Iowa,
July 1, 1948.

Chief of Police Mathews,
Home address,
West Palm Beach, Florida.

Dear Chief Mathews,

I will introduce myself by reminding you of a telephone call you received on the first Saturday afternoon in March at your home, asking for permission to remain on Florida Avenue where I had started to paint a picture and from which place three policemen were earnestly trying to remove me. I had hoped I would get a chance to thank you in person for your courtesy in allowing me to remain but the last busy days in West Palm Beach following the end of the special course under Eliot O'Hara at the Norton Art School were further complicated by the fact that Harper Clark Jr. crashed into my automobile in one of the traffic tie-ups on Lakeview Bridge.

Remarks that were made by negro people at the filling station in front of which I was sitting and from which I telephoned gave me an insight into your character and a belief that you would be interested in the subsequent story. When you granted permission I was told that you are a fine understanding person, and your mother is a fine, Christian woman. I could tell that the negroes felt that they had a fair person to appeal to over unfair or prejudiced actions of individual officers.

The story is that after I arrived home I was notified that STREET SCENE (Florida Avenue) had won first prize in the water color section of the student exhibition at the Norton Art School. Brief mention was made of this in our local newspaper. Then friends who operate the Travel Bureau here decided my work deserved wider publicity and they arranged for me to hold an exhibition of my paintings, a few done in Florida, two in South Carolina and the rest since I came home. This is one of the most outstanding pieces of good fortune that can come to an artist. An unlooked for number of people came to see the pictures the four days they were on exhibit. I made a few sales which will supply me with money with which to buy more materials with which to paint more pictures.

Because of my extreme good fortune in connection with STREET SCENE I am hoping that through your influence some arrangement can be made with the Norton Art Gallery for it to be open at some time every week to negro people as well as to whites for art knows no color line. I make an especially strong plea for this for in those hours that I spent on Florida Avenue, I spent much of it, not painting, but talking to the truly interested spectators. I found so many people who loved to draw or paint but who had given it up, perhaps from lack of contact with anything to inspire them to continue.

The negro people are recognized as an artistic people and in your own city there may be talent that would bring great credit to the community if some help could be given to its expression. I understand that specially invited and escorted tours of negro teachers sometimes visit the gallery and I am glad for that - but that does not satisfy the hunger of the common man on the street for the joy of seeing the work of some of the world's greatest artists. It helps the student less than it might.

This is where your department comes in might you not offer to post guards throughout the gallery? I can understand how even that is an insult to negro visitors when it is not done otherwise. However, it is the only gallery I have ever seen that does not have uniformed male guards who keep everyone, white or colored, carefully in view to prevent vandalism. It would be understandable that if people have grown up without visiting art galleries they might not know the limitations that are necessarily imposed. In other words, paintings and sculpture cannot be subjected to curious and exploring fingers.

Some onlookers suggested it would be a fine thing if my painting could be shown at the negro high school or is it an industrial arts school. It showed the importance my painting there at all held for them. Some came back at intervals to see the progress of the work and others identified people I had included in the painting (though I had made no attempt to portray individuals). One man asked, "Ma'am, are you painting this because it's a slum?"

Friday, the day I had started it had been World Day of Prayer and I had meant to attend one of the services, but I was delayed and the friendly contacts I had with these people who shared with me this interest in art made me feel I had done something ~~such~~ more tangible in the field of good human relations than had I attended a service. One man said "It's what we need, is to have more white folks come here." That was why it all seemed so fantastic when the white officers ordered me out of the section so brusquely. Granted terrible things happen there (as where indeed do they not?) I am convinced had any intoxicated person or anyone else have done the least thing to annoy me I would have been immediately surrounded by protectors. I never felt safer out sketching alone in my life.

It is ironical, isn't it, that the people who appeared in my painting and the many interested spectators who watched it grow could not have entered the exhibition gallery to see the picture hung there. The pleasure that STREET SCENE has already given me would be truly complete if by these few words we exchanged over the telephone something could come to improve this unhappy condition of restriction under which the negro lives. Other southern cities have been making notable advances and I feel confident that West Palm Beach will not lag behind.

Very sincerely yours,

P. S. Might you tell the two officers who would have been cruising Florida Avenue that Saturday afternoon and the officer of that beat that the painting won first prize - and can you think of any way to tell the people who stood near the filling station watching me work? Across the street was a pool hall full of hot jazz and the buildings were grey with blue balconies, on the east side of the street. There seemed to be little stores in the corner building. This was several blocks north of the railroad tracks that cross Florida Avenue. I will enclose a clipping for possible help in locating the neighborhood, though it's hard to see details in such small scale.