



Kentucky art teacher was 'Sybil,' scholar confirms



From the Detroit Free Press: December 23, 1998

BY JENNIFER HEWLETT

Knight Ridder Newspapers

LEXINGTON, Ky. -- Shirley Ardell Mason lived quietly in Lexington for more than 20 years, painting and running an arts business out of her home. Her friends suspected that she was "Sybil," the subject of a 1970s best-selling book about a psychiatric patient plagued with multiple personalities. Now they know she was.

Mason, who had lived in Lexington at least since the mid-1970s, died Feb. 26 at her home. She was 75.

Until now, the identity of Sybil, who has been called the most famous psychiatric patient in history, had never been made public.

That's all changing with a book scheduled for publication in 1999 and a documentary scheduled to begin filming in January. Peter Swales, a psychiatric historian in New York City, says he is coauthoring the book and will work on the documentary for British television.

He says through research and interviews he has identified Mason as Sybil Isabel Dorsett, the pseudonym of the woman in the book written by journalist Flora Rheta Schreiber.

"If I say that, indeed, Sybil was Shirley Mason, then it's fact. It's not going to be disputed," said Swales.

Rumors that Mason was Sybil have circulated in the Lexington area for years. Former neighbors said they started thinking the quiet and friendly woman might be Sybil when they noticed that Dr. Cornelia Wilbur, identified in the book as Sybil's psychiatrist, was a frequent visitor at Mason's home.

Wilbur, who was a professor of psychiatry at the University of Kentucky, died in 1992. "They were fast friends. When Dr. Wilbur wasn't there, Ms. Mason was at Dr. Wilbur's house," said Pat Cress, a former next-door neighbor of Mason. Cress was interviewed shortly after Mason's death.

Mason, who displayed her work on the walls of her Lexington home, was an assistant art professor at Rio Grande College in Ohio in 1969 and 1970, according to college yearbooks.

Neighbors said that both Mason and Wilbur had poodles. The book "Sybil" mentions Wilbur's and Sybil's poodles.

Next month, a Georgetown, Ind., antiques and art firm will offer about 30 of Mason's paintings for sale in New York City.

The paintings will be sold Jan. 16 and 17 at the Americana at the Piers in New York, said dealer Rod Lich. He estimated they would bring \$1,000 to \$3,000 each.

Lich said his company bought the paintings from Mark Boultinghouse and Ron Hall, who operate an antiques business in Midway, Ky. Boultinghouse said they acquired more than 40 of Mason's paintings from her estate.

"We are selling them as paintings done by the person who really was Sybil," Lich said. "In all candor, that's what makes them valuable. It's the reputation of the artist. The image on the canvas isn't worth as much money as the name up in the corner."

In her will, Wilbur left Mason \$25,000. And Wilbur left income from the book and any works derived from it to Donald Frei, the agent for Mason Arts Inc.

The events in the book begin in 1954, when Sybil first went to see Wilbur. Sybil was a graduate student at Columbia University at the time. Wilbur treated her for 11 years.

"Sybil," published in 1973, created a sensation with its account of a woman who harbored within her more than a dozen distinct personalities, some of whom were males.

Equally popular was the 1976 TV movie based on the book. It earned an Emmy award for Sally Field, who portrayed Sybil as a young woman who developed multiple personalities as a way to cope with fears stemming from her upbringing by a cruel, mentally ill mother. Joanne Woodward played the part of Wilbur.

Together, the book and movie helped popularize what psychiatrists call "multiple-personality disorder," or MPD.

Before "Sybil" appeared, MPD was considered a rare mental disorder, and the American Psychiatric Association did not list it as a distinct disease. After the book and movie, there was a huge increase in reported MPD cases. By 1984, an international society devoted to the study of multiple-personality disorder had been formed.

Many credit the popularity of "Sybil" for forming the model for multiple-personality disorder and fueling a big part of the MPD explosion. Recently, the illness was renamed dissociative-identity disorder.

Shirley Ardell Mason was born Jan. 25, 1923, in Dodge Center, Minn., the daughter of Walter Mason and Martha Alice Hageman Mason. Shirley Mason never married.

Swales said people who knew Mason in Minnesota recognized the similarities between her and Sybil when they first read Schreiber's book.

"It came out in 1975 in Minnesota that Sybil was none other than Shirley Mason," Swales said.

"Even before she arrived in Lexington, she had severed almost all connections with her past," Swales said. "All those people that had known her (in Minnesota) were in torment as to what had ever happened to her.... From a community point of view, she just vanished into thin air."

Like Mason's neighbors, art dealer Boultinghouse said he had heard the rumor about Mason and Sybil being one and the same, and that he had done some research on his own.

He said he came across a clipping from a Midwestern newspaper about Shirley Mason leaving a teaching position to attend Columbia University. Sybil attended Columbia University after leaving a junior high school teaching post. It's not clear why Mason moved to Lexington.

"It's one of those elusive sort of stories, and I think it has a certain mystique to it and always will," Boultinghouse said.