Charity Ray: Artist at Home
Pauline B. Cheek, January 1981

Her parents both working outside the home, a five-year-old was sent to school with two older sisters. The teacher gave her paper, pencil, and crayons so she could entertain herself. Soon the little girl was being called on to decorate the blackboard for holidays, a function she performed throughout grammar school. In high school she enrolled in an art class under a teacher who stressed shading and introduced her to India ink.

Such was the beginning of an art career for Charity Ray, whose watercolors have provided the most recent exhibit for the Appalachian Room of Mars Hill College Library. The progression of Charity's career has not been continuous, however. In less than a year her art teacher at Asheville's Allen School was called back to her home in Iowa. Nevertheless, the teacher encouraged her through correspondence, and C harity replied with Christmas cards which she had drawn. Upon graduation from high school, Charity worked as babysitter in Mars Hill. "I was a little mama," Charity recalled. "I would rush to get the housework done so I could sit down with the children to watch Captain Kangaroo. We would make all sorts of things."

Prompted by her dream of going to art school, Charity entered a "Draw Me" contest. "I never will forget. I did a cardinal in a dogwood tree and sent it back. I passed the test." In response, a man came to her home to persuade her to enter commercial art school. Charity's mother, however, was warned by a neighbor that art was not in demand. "That discouraged me," Charity said, "and I put down art for a long time."

Instead she went wherever she thought she could be of help, including extended stays with a married sister in Tennessee and one in Virginia. A visit with a cousin in New York led to her spending ten years in that city. "I had a feeling I might stay," Charity commented, and she found employment in a chemical company, as a babysitter, and finally in a department store. Likewise on a trip home she had a feeling that she would not return to the city, even though she was in line for a promotion. It was discovered that her father had cancer, and she remained to help care for him.

When asked whether she has frequent premonitions, Charity replied, "Oh yes. I've always had these feelings. You let them lead you where they will. I never plan the future. I take it one day at a time." After a moment of reflection Charity commented with a degree of amazement, "Oh know, so far I've done exactly what I wanted to. I didn't dwell on it, or even plan on it; I just did it."

Long ago, for example, Charity predicted that someday she would work for Mars Hill College, yet she did not solicit a job with the school. One day a man appeared at her house and urged her to apply; for the New Careers Program. Impressed with the fact that he had cared enough to walk through snow to seek her out, Charity did apply and was given work in the office of Dr. Richard Hoffman. Three years later she accepted her present position on the staff of Memorial Library, where she has worked with periodicals and in the Reference Room.

Similarly, Charity's art career has evolved rather than being planned. While in New York she visited art galleries and, during a transit strike, bought oils so that she could experiment with this medium. Only since coming to work at the library, however, has she pursued art with any regularity. While bedridden with a back problem Charity brought out her oils, and that, she claimed, "got my adrenalin flowing again."

Then when Harriet Bucy offered a course in watercolors Charity enrolled. "She told us to collect pictures we wanted to copy, and I already had zillions," Charity recounted. "She showed us her technique, but mine didn't work that way at all. All this wet stuff kept running together. But when I got home and started experimenting I began to understand how to work with it." Now watercolor is her favorite medium. Oils, she claimed, are too slow for her, and acrylics, "with all those little pots you have

to clean up," are inconvenient on the kitchen table where she works. Charity paints fast, and she enjoys the challenge of mixing watercolors. "I use heavy paint and a dry brush to give a rich look," she said. "I want to see things in living color. If I have color at the end of a brush I can form things better than with a pencil."

Enthusiasm sparked Charity's voice as she talked of the many interests that give her satisfaction. "Ever since I was a kid I've always loved nature," she said, a love that is reflected in her paintings of birds, flowers, and landscapes. "I have two dogs and two cats, and of course I watch all the birds and rabbits." Family is especially important to Charity. She and her mother live together, and she enjoys recalling childhood days with ;her two sisters when, for example, they turned Saturday house cleaning into a game, pulling each other around on the old trousers they used for polishing the floor.

Charity's interest in art is matched by a love of music. "In my mind I always knew that if I could sit down at a piano I could play." Now that she has a piano of her own she does play, both by ear and by note. She serves as pianist for her church, which also ranks high on her list of priorities. As befits one who works in a library she likes to read, particularly historical novels and books of travel. "I like to go places, too," Charity continued. She attends shows, concerts, and the ballet, and she has happy memories of a trip to Washington, D. C. Someday, she is confident, she will travel more extensively.

Above all, Charity loves people. "I would like to feel that everybody is my friend. I think that's why I get along so well. I don't see how anyone can survive if we can't see ourselves as we are and adjust and not be pulled by forces. If we're gazing too far out front we miss what we have right here." Charity's ability to live fully in the present is evident in her art, her music, and her loyalty to family, church, and community.