**Artist:** Hen Pen Studio: Ruth Dagne Pither (1909 – 1985)

**Born:** November 7, 1909 in Sweden, to Agda Elisabeth Andersson/Nilson (1887–1926) and Axel Nilson (1881–1954)

**Early life:** At the young age of 3 or 4 years, Ruth immigrated with her parents to Niagara Falls ON, Canada. After their initial several years of residence in Niagara Falls, the family began to follow Axel's job progressively northward as it moved along the railway line from Niagara Falls, to Port Credit ON, to Coppercliff ON, to Levack ON. Finally they settled in Schumacher ON, a northern frontier town a mile from Timmins, populated in large part at the time by immigrant gold miners, railway workers, and aboriginal Canadians. By the time the family reached Schumacher, Ruth would have been about 13 years old. She was pleasantly surprised/local one

**Married:** in 1926 at age 17 to William (Bill) Edwin Pither, a British immigrant. They resided for several years in Ruth’s father’s house in Schumacher. There her first two children, Ruth and Wilma, were born; and sister Ruby, only 2 years old when their mother died, joined Ruth’s family at age 9 and stayed until the family left Axel’s home to move to a larger house in another nearby mining town, Gold Centre. Ruby initially remained behind with her father and brother but then happily rejoined Ruth’s family in Gold Centre when she was about 11. The youngest 2 of Ruth’s 4 children, Christopher and Joan (Sonja) were born during her years in Gold Centre.

**The Move south:** In 1938 Ruth, Bill, and the 5 children packed some belongings into their old Oldsmobile and drove south with no specific destination in mind. Four hundred miles along, they came across a farm for sale near Orillia ON. There was no running water, indoor plumbing, hydro, central heating, storm windows, or even effective insulation in the house. However, Bill’s lungs were beginning to succumb to the below-ground gold miners’ work; and so they purchased the farm. Ruth and the children remained there then, and Bill joined them four years later - having continued working at ‘the McIntyre’ in Timmins until his finances were in order for him to rely, as sole means of support, on the developing farm. At that point he moved south. They remodeled the old farmhouse, built a new two-story addition with all the basic amenities, tore down the original cow barns, built a large, state-of-the art chicken house with rows of private egg-laying compartments, and began raising hens and vegetable gardens.

**Artistic development:** There’s been an oft told tale in the Pither family of Ruth’s sudden discovery that she could paint, one day during the time she lived in Gold Centre. As the story goes, it was a Christmas tradition to give water colour paint sets to each of the children - as one of their annual gifts ...a kind of invitation to self-expression. As a result of this, Ruth one day picked up a set of their paints and a brush and tried her hand. She was pleasantly surprised/amazed by the result. Painting with water colours became an ongoing delight and frequent pastime for her.

In regard to her later 4-year-long solo experience on the farm, she eventually could laughingly say to friends, “If I’d known Bill was going to bring me to this God-forsaken farm, I’d never have married him!” But in truth, by the time she’d arrived there, she was already advancing in her use of water colours, along with some dabbling in oils and pastels; and this new countryside was filled with scenery and critters waiting to be painted... scenes of fall leaves and evergreens, snow scenes, a Christmas concert in the local one-room public school, horse teams, deer, rabbits, gophers... She painted them all. Then, in 1954 or so, she discovered that workable clay existed in the farm’s fields. She began to dig it up and model clay figures. Later, she purchased commercial clays and a kiln.
In time, after her children had left home, she moved her paintings and ceramic pieces to the chicken house which Bill had remodeled for her use. She teasingly named the building, “Hen Pen Studio.” All the same, the name stuck and she began to sign some of her work with that name.

Many people came to see her in the studio and purchase pieces of her work. Most had heard of her by word-of-mouth. Some were well-known people such as the then Canadian Governor-General Roland Michener, and the Canadian TV personality and singer, ‘Our Pet Juliette.’ Norval Morrisseau, who had previously purchased some of her pieces, asked her to make a particular clay piece for him; it was a subject she had used several times before - happy children on a toboggan. She was in the process of putting the finishing touches on that piece of his, on February 12, 1985, when she suffered a massive stroke. She never woke again and she died quietly in hospital two days later, surrounded by her children. Bill’s lung condition had taken him 15 years before.

She left behind 4 children, 17 grandchildren, and pieces of Canadian art scattered from Muskoka ON to California US.

Her work typically is signed ‘R Pither’, ‘Pither’, ‘RP’, or ‘Hen Pen’, (the latter only after 1957,) sometimes including ‘Canada’
**Inuit Woman and Child** against background of **wall-hanging** – (homespun wool, hand dyed with natural dyes, hand woven.)

Clay figures about 8.5 and 5.5 inches tall

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