

From the Archives: Betty Parsons, Gallerist Turned Artist, Takes the Spotlight, in 1979

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Betty Parsons, *Orange*, 1956, acrylic on canvas.

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When art historians mention Betty Parsons, they're usually talking about her New York gallery, which, in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, was responsible in part for making Abstract Expressionism famous. In addition to showing Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and many others, however, Parsons was herself a painter. She considered herself a good gallerist—and a good artist. "I've learned a great deal about business, but I wasn't a businesswoman," Betty Parsons told Grace Lichtenstein in a profile that originally ran in the March 1979 issue of ARTnews, published just three years before Parsons's death, in 1982. On the occasion of a show of Parsons's work at Alexander Gray Associates gallery in New York, that article follows in full below. —Alex Greenberger

“Betty Parsons: Still trying to find the creative world in everything”

By Grace Lichtenstein

March 1979

She’s been in the center of the modern art movement since the 1920s, has known everyone and seen everything, and remains a remarkable talent scout, with the ability to encourage her artists to outdo themselves.

“Oh, we must have this!” exclaims Betty Parsons, art dealer, cultural doyenne and legend in her own time, as she pulls a dusty print out of a cardboard box in a dark storeroom hidden away in a Long Island City warehouse.

“And this Murch! The most valuable one of all! We must have that. And here’s a Pomodoro—another valuable one. This is a Pollock . . .” For the first time in ages she is going through part of her personal collection, the part that is not on loan as a traveling exhibition to American embassies around the world. In a black beret and black shoes, sensible-length skirt and simple blue cloth coat, Parsons, at 79, rummages through these treasures like a bargain-minded antiques hunter at a weekend flea market.

She has come to the warehouse storeroom to unload some shipping crates. But once in the company of these old friends from 40 years in the business, Parsons cannot contain an enthusiasm that keeps her poring through the hodgepodge of material. When Jack Tilton, her young assistant, points out that the Pollock is not signed, she replies firmly, “It’s still valuable.” A moment later out comes a drawing of a young girl, fashionably dressed in slacks, hair bobbed. “A drawing of me by Hedda Sterne, done some time ago,” she announces. Next comes a painting by Pat Adams, a teacher at Bennington. “Isn’t it a beauty? It’s a beauty!”

Nearly an hour later she declares, “From now on, I must come here once a week. Look at all of this! I’ll have to spend some time getting rid of some of it. Here’s an early Agnes Martin!” Tilton says the Museum of Modern Art wants it. “They’d give you a good tax break,” he adds. Parsons, seeming hardly to hear him, says, “I’ve got to get my jeans on, come out here with Gwen, bring some sandwiches and get some work done.”

This burst of energy is neither rare nor isolated for Parsons. Assistants and friends who are a quarter of a century younger than she often have a hard time keeping her pace. On the day of the warehouse visit, for instance, she arises as usual, about 7 a.m. in her Upper West Side apartment. Stretching exercises are followed by reading an eclectic stack of magazines (*Saturday Review*, *The Nation*, *Ms.*). Next she breakfasts with her houseguest, Steingrim Laursen, consultant to the director of the Louisiana Museum in Denmark. Driving her beat-up but serviceable station wagon to a Midtown garage, she then settles in the office of her gallery at 24 West 57th Street, greets several artists, takes a reporter to lunch at a Japanese restaurant and submits to an interview.

Following the warehouse visit, she makes another brief appearance at the gallery, drives home, goes out to dinner with photographer Berenice Abbott (both of them studied long ago with French sculptor Emile Antoine Bourdelle) and prepares to drive the next morning to her Southold, Long Island, studio to paint.

But it is not her staying power that has made Parsons such a major figure in the art world; by now her energy, while prodigious, is taken for granted. First and foremost she is regarded as the den mother of Abstract Expressionism. In the 1940s and 1950s her gallery was the leader in showing works by such artists as Pollock, Rothko, Still, Newman, Hofmann and Reinhardt, well before success claimed them. The fact that the majority of them eventually left for greater rewards from more aggressive dealers has not dimmed Parsons' reputation. She is still regarded as a remarkable talent scout, with an ability to encourage her artists to outdo themselves, to grow and experiment rather than rework the same old material. Moreover, she has won a reputation as an artist in her own right: a solo exhibition of her work was shown in New York last fall, and during 1979 Atlanta and Albuquerque will also see exhibitions.

Beyond these accomplishments, however, there is Betty Parsons the presence, a diminutive woman with a rapid-fire burst of laughter, who has been at the center of the modern art movement since Paris in the 1920s, who has known everyone and seen everything, yet who still comes across today as fresh and as interested as she must have been 50 years ago. In her younger days her high cheekbones and pageboy-cut blonde hair led some to compare her look with those of Garbo. Today, often dressed in prim skirts and sweaters along with sensibly heeled shoes, she suggests the New England schoolmarm.



The March 1979 cover of *ARTnews*.
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Betty Parsons, *Requiem*, 1963, acrylic on canvas.
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“She’s able to transform everything that’s going on into some form of energy,” says Sibyl Weil, an artist who had her first one-woman show last fall at the Parsons Gallery.

“I’m trying to find the creative world in everything, whether it’s dance or painting or poetry,” says Parsons. “I have so many interests.” Her gallery has shows scheduled for the next 18 months. She’s thinking of selling her house in Maine because her wanderings elsewhere have kept her away from it so much. During the summer of 1978 she managed to make the art rounds in London, Paris and Copenhagen as well as to spend five weeks painting on Long Island.

“Retire?” she echoes the question as if it were in a foreign language. In mock-Irish brogue she replies with a laugh, “It’s not me nature. Working, for me, is great relaxation.” For deeper relaxation she has for years belonged to Subud, a meditative organization whose technique she describes as “surrender. You throw away your body, your mind, you become a vacuum, and the life force enters. It’s made a big difference to me. I’m not as nervous as I used to be.”

One can imagine the nervous energy the young Betty Pierson must have exuded as a socially well-connected belle in the teens of this century, vacationing in Newport and Palm Beach, attending Miss Randall McKeever’s Finishing School. (“My family is New York,” she says proudly, noting she was born in a building on what is now Rockefeller Center.) In 1919 she married socialite Schuyler Livingston Parsons, but within three years it became clear to her that they were incompatible. Somewhat scandalized by the idea of divorce, in 1922 her family sent her to Paris, where she flourished.



Betty Parsons, *Green #1*, 1971, acrylic on canvas.

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She had studied art as a teenager in New York, had taken private sculpture and drawing lessons after her marriage and had even been offered a job as a fashion designer. Now she was free to pursue her love of art. She took a studio and resumed lessons. During her ten-year stay in Paris she met everyone from Hart Crane and Gertrude Stein to Man Ray and Gurdjiev. Max Jacob did her horoscope. Alexander Calder took her dancing every week—“for the exercise.”

Returning to the United States in 1933, she lived for some time in California, where she taught drawing and sculpture. Her tennis was so good she was asked to join a national team (she decided against it), and her personality was so engaging that she even became a friend of the reclusive Garbo. But, homesick for New York, she returned to her native city in the late 1930s.

She soon began to organize exhibitions for others, whereupon a gallery owner who had shown Parsons' own work offered her a chance to sell on a commission basis. Throughout World War II she managed galleries for others, observing firsthand the ferment in American painting that was later to explode into a revolution called Abstract Expressionism. One biographer has said that Parsons found herself in the right place at the right time, but much more was involved. From the beginning she understood that the work of Pollock and Rothko, de Kooning and Newman heralded a new era. Her artist's eye caught the emotional and intellectual intensity of their vision and its power to transform postwar American painting. In 1946 she was able to open her own gallery. A year later the major patron on the avant-garde, Peggy Guggenheim, closed her gallery to move to Europe. Parsons was the beneficiary, even though Abstract Expressionism was derided by many critics.

“Back in the '40s and '50s there was a hostility that I was up against. The abstract world was considered cold because it didn't have figures. But it had fire, energy, nature, light, space—it concentrated on all those values,” Parsons recalls.

One by one the artists turned that hostility into respect . . . and money. And one by one they were wooed away from Parsons who had no money to subsidize them, by others who could. For the most part she bears no grudges. “I was always ten years ahead of my time. That's the story of my life.” Some people bought paintings from her in the early days for a few hundred dollars. Ten or 15 years later the same paintings were regarded as masterpieces by the art world at large, not just Parsons, and the owners would have her sell one for thousands of dollars as a means of financing their children's college educations.

In the early days the artists often pitched in to help hang one another's show, although famous feuds developed, as Parsons liked to recall. “Barney [Newman] knew everything. He was the most balanced. But he despised Ad Reinhardt. What a great wit, Reinhardt! They would have had a duel if it was the age for it. I think that's why Barney left me. He couldn't bear it, his paintings rubbing up against Reinhardt's! I gave them their first shows—Rothko, Newman, Hofmann, Still, Pollock . . . But each of them left me. I don't know why. It almost killed me, but I stayed good friends with every one of them except for Still. I think that nearly all the artists seemed to get better with me. When they went over to Sidney Janis, I always thought they went rather dead,” she muses.



Betty Parsons, *Sputnik*, 1961, acrylic on canvas.

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Janis, according to Parsons and her longtime associate, Jock Truman, stole not only her artists but her exhibition space as well. She shared a floor with Janis on East 57th Street. While she was negotiating a new lease with the building manager, Janis, according to Truman, was closing a deal with the building owner to take over Parsons' area. Truman says Janis gave her just 15 days to get out. Parsons fought the eviction and finally won a stay in court, but the battle soured her on the building and she moved to West 57th Street, then virgin territory for galleries. By moving, she claims, she started the westward trend that continues today.

Janis naturally tells the story differently. In his version the landlord discovered that he was violating fire laws by having two tenants on one floor, so he invited Janis to remain while asking Parsons to move. "She resented it because she had been there a year or two earlier," Janis says, adding that "the relationship was cool to begin with because several of her artists had left her to come to me." He also says he allowed her four months to make her move, even though she technically had only 60 days.

"I think she's a dedicated person." Janis says, recollecting the prickly contacts the two have had. He emphasizes that "at no time did we take any artists away from Betty Parsons. They came after they left her. They were free agents looking for a new gallery, and I didn't hesitate." Among those who switched to Janis were Rothko and Pollock. Janis himself, however, credits Parsons with foresight about Abstract Expressionism way before it was synonymous with six- and seven-digit sales figures. "She was on the scene when there were very few people astute enough to see what was happening," Janis acknowledges.



Reflecting on the changes in galleries since then, Parsons sees much more willingness to show novel work: "more sympathy for the unusual," she calls it. However, she also sees much more concern for profit and loss because expenses have gone up "astronomically" and competition for sales among galleries has markedly increased.

There's been a remarkable growth in the number of art buffs, as Parsons views it, although not necessarily in collectors. "It's a phenomenon," she says of recent museum crowds.

Betty Parsons, *Gold Stipple Moonshot*, 1972, acrylic on canvas.
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“Back then, museums were dark and three people a week came in. Today you can’t move through them, they’re so packed. But I don’t know if that’s encouraged new collectors.” Truman likes to recall the time an advertising agency wanted to borrow a big painting from her to sit over an office sofa, so the room would look more homelike. “Home?” said Parsons haughtily. “I’m interested in important paintings, not in the home.” She refused to lend even a small painting.

One explanation often offered for the defection of her earlier stable of artists is that Parsons was an indifferent businesswoman. While not exactly denying that others make more profits, she merely suggests that money is not the main object of running a gallery. “I’m here to promote the artist,” she says firmly, as others go about preparing an exhibition of Danish artist Jan Groth’s work in her gallery. “But I’m equally here to convince the public, so I work equally hard in both directions.”

She pauses in her big white-walled office to read a statement about Groth posted at the entrance to the show: “The sound of the line drawn so taught like wind in a pine.” Parsons flashes a grin that stretches her mouth like a rubber band from cheek to cheek and then snaps it back almost instantaneously. “I thought that up in the middle of the night!” she states possessively. “Look at that drawing! Isn’t that what it is?”

“I’ve learned a great deal about business,” she says, returning to the previous conversation, “but I wasn’t naturally a businesswoman. I was interested in creation.” As far as profit goes, she says she pays her bills, and when funds get low she sells something from her personal collection. “I’m not going to leave very much money. Thank God I have no children to support.” She doesn’t sound unduly concerned about either matter.

Artists who have remained with her over the years, as well as younger ones such as Sibyl Weil, revere Parsons’ taste and respect her criticism. Cleve Gray, who has dropped by to chat in her outer reception area, says he waited “many, many years” to show at the Betty Parsons Gallery. “I’ve had many dealers,” he adds. “I started in ’46. But I never had a dealer who really understood what my painting was about until Betty. I think that’s because she’s a painter herself and loves painting. You want to surpass yourself for her. She never offers ideas on what you should paint. If she doesn’t like it, she’s silent, and the silence is deafening. If she does like it, she explodes with excitement.”

Parsons as a businesswoman? “She isn’t,” Gray replies. “You make your choice. She does not push. She doesn’t hustle. It’s very rare for Betty to call a museum person or a customer and say, ‘Come to my show.’ Others are on the phone all the time, they give big parties, use every commercial means. Betty looks out for the artist.”



Betty Parsons, African Dawn, 1972, acrylic on canvas.
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Weil is similarly grateful. “I’m not in any way known, but Betty has no sense of discriminating between someone who is famous or someone who is not. She’s equally receptive or nonreceptive. She’s got so much confidence that comes from her own experience that she doesn’t need to be aware of what other people think. She has no dogma that causes her to have one style of work, so she’s always open to what she likes,” says Weil.

Once, according to Truman, Parsons had a terrible fight with an artist. The same evening she went to a big exhibition of his work in a museum. Toward the end of the evening Truman went off to fetch Parsons’ coat, returning to find her, “in front of one of the paintings, lost in absolute rapture.” When he asked how she could do that, considering their argument, she told him, “Always identify with the art; never identify with the artist.” It could be her credo.

Parson’s own art has lately turned to pieces of “found” weathered wood; the sculptures look almost childlike. “She’s a real artist,” says Patrick Ireland, another artist in her stable. “It’s a peculiar form of masochism to be vastly talented as an artist and to do business as a dealer, but then Betty’s grander than being a dealer. Being a dealer is just one expression of her passion for artists and good art.”

“In my second show,” he recalls, “I did a piece no one would buy—a colored rope drawing suspended in great arcs from the ceiling. Betty said, ‘If I had a daughter, I would have her married under this.’ She’s remarkable in that when she backs an artist she back him totally.”

Even those who have gone to other galleries speak warmly of Parsons. “Virtually everybody who is anybody in the art world was shown by Betty at some point,” contends Alexander Liberman. One notable exception was Jasper Johns. “I just didn’t like his work,” she says of the paintings he twice urged her to exhibit in the early 1950s. Now, one of his later works—a red, blue and gold flag lithograph—is among her prized possessions. “I own some of his work and he owns some of mine. We exchange,” she says, adding, “I think he’s marvelous. But by the time I realized it I was five or six years too late!”

She did like the bizarre men and women who inhabited the last Richard Lindner’s paintings, but in his case the story has a reverse twist. “He was with me for four years,” she says, “and I couldn’t sell anything. Then along came Pop art, and they related it to Linder. Everything I had in my last show of his later sold to museums. I never sold one when I had them.”



Betty Parsons, Challenge, 1976, acrylic on canvas.
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ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK

Parsons' receptivity to new ideas seems today as committed as ever. (Though Parsons is thoroughly up to date on her own world, her knowledge of others is not always so wide ranging. Someone once introduced her to the president of United Artists at a party. "United Artists? I haven't heard of that gallery," she told him.)

Besides Gray, Groth and Weil, Parsons also shows Bill Taggart, Richard Francisco, Stephen Porter, Thomas George, Hedda Sterne, the Walter Murch Estate and Calvert Coggeshall, among others. What she looks for, what pleases her the most in her artists, is growth. Of Francisco, for example, she says he is "very sensitive, with much more authority now." Of her stable as a whole: "They get freer and more creative as they go along. I've always encouraged that."

Despite her hectic schedule, Parsons manages to see many new young artists. What does she look for in their work? "What Willa Cather called 'that quality of life.' I'd rather have it than skill—that feeling which is the content of all the great art in the world," she replies.

Her various homes—that apartment in Manhattan, houses in Main, Southold and the Caribbean Island of St. Martin—are, in Jack Tilton's words, "filled to the brim" with her own and others' pictures and sculpture. Yet she is always on the lookout for whatever is new. The work that made the biggest impression on her last summer in Europe was the Centre Georges Pompidou (the Beaubourg) in Paris. "The new wing of the National Gallery in Washington is the most beautiful thing built in my period," she remarks. "Beaubourg indicates another period. It has nothing to do with architecture as we know it, but it has something to do with the future."

Perhaps that's why she has no love for schools such as New Realism, although she may like individual artists within the school. "The New Realism to me was so cold and rigid. It didn't have the life of the thing, just the sight of the thing," she says, sipping soup in her favorite Japanese restaurant. A moment later she adds, "Thank God there don't seem to be any 'isms' today. I hate fashions."

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