

# Art in America

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## THE PARSONS EFFECT

by Judith E. Stein, Helène Aylon



Betty Parsons, 1963.  
Photo Alexander  
Lieberman. The Getty  
Research Institute, Los  
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Betty Biene Pierson, the rebellious, self-assured offspring of an old New York family, was 13 when she visited the historic Armory Show in 1913 and set her course on becoming an artist. Her conservative parents acquiesced to art lessons but drew the line at higher education for women. At 20, she married Schuyler Livingston Parsons, a man of wealth and social standing. He proved to be as captivated by men as she was by women, and a gambler and an alcoholic to boot. The couple divorced amicably in Paris, where she spent the 1920s in comfort, sharing her life with Adge Baker, a British art student, and taking classes with Ossip Zadkine and Antoine Bourdelle, among others. Her friends included expatriate Americans Hart Crane, Man Ray, Alexander Calder, and Gerald and Sara Murphy, as well as lesbian literati Gertrude Stein, Natalie Barney and Janet Flanner.

Disinherited after her divorce, Parsons also lost her alimony support when the stock market crashed. Generous girlhood friends aided her return to the U.S. in 1933, first to Hollywood, where her acquaintances numbered Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Tallulah Bankhead, Dorothy Parker and Robert Benchley. She then lived in Santa Barbara, teaching art, painting portraits and consulting on French wines at a liquor store. In 1935, she funded a move to New York by selling her engagement ring. Parsons's loyal circle supplemented the slender income she earned from sales of her own art and from commissions by dealers such as Mrs. Cornelius J. Sullivan (Mary Quinn Sullivan), one of the three "founding mothers" of the Museum of Modern Art. At 39, Parsons met Rosalind Constable, later a writer, art critic and collector, and the two formed a lifelong personal partnership.

Informed by her years in Paris, Parsons had an eye for innovative abstract art. From 1940 to 1944, she ran an art gallery in the Wakefield Bookshop basement on 56th Street, granting early shows

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to such artists as Alfonso Ossorio, Joseph Cornell, Saul Steinberg, Hedda Sterne, Theodoros Stamos and Adolph Gottlieb. Then Mortimer Brandt, who dealt in old masters, hired her to organize a new section on contemporary art for his gallery. Hans Hofmann, Ad Reinhardt and Mark Rothko were among those she exhibited. Brandt retired in 1946, and Parsons borrowed funds to establish Betty Parsons Gallery at 11 East 57th Street. Her friend Barnett Newman curated her opening show of Northwest Coast Indian art. He joined her stable and brought along Jackson Pollock and Clyfford Still from Peggy Guggenheim's just-closed Art of This Century gallery.

Between 1949 and 1951, Parsons propelled her "Four Horsemen" (as she referred to Pollock, Rothko, Newman and Still) to fame, while also showing her Wakefield discoveries and lesser-known lights, many of them women. When her celebrity artists pressed her to create a more exclusive roster, Parsons demurred, and they decamped for such commerce-oriented galleries as that of Sidney Janis, who promoted careers in ways the financially challenged, soft-selling Parsons could not. In the course of 36 years, the Betty Parsons Gallery mounted important early shows of Robert Rauschenberg, Kenzo Okada, Jack Youngerman, Anne Ryan, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Richard Pousette-Dart, Leon Polk Smith, Forrest Bess, Sonia Sekula, Herbert Ferber, Seymour Lipton, Eduardo Paolozzi, Alexander Liberman, Barbara Chase-Riboud, Richard Lindner, Agnes Martin, Ellsworth Kelly, John Walker, Patrick Ireland, Robert Murray, Thomas Nozkowski and Richard Tuttle.

"I give them walls. They do the rest," Parsons famously said of her artists. A trendsetter in contemporary art gallery design, Parsons spurned the common style of simulated domestic interiors, choosing instead bare floors, white walls and bright lights. Throughout her career as an art dealer, she continued to make and exhibit her own art, retreating every weekend to her cottage and studio in Southold, Long Island, designed by Tony Smith. Following a stroke, she died there in 1982 at the age of 82.

Artist Helène Aylon (b. 1931), who showed at Betty Parsons Gallery, interviewed her dealer on Jan. 19, 1977, for *Heresies* magazine's groundbreaking issue on lesbian art and artists. But their conversation never appeared in *Heresies* because the 77-year-old dealer, who had been open about her sexuality in her youth, now guarded her privacy. Parsons responded warmly to Aylon, and otherwise spoke with candor about her extraordinary life. Aylon did publish an excerpt of her interview in the fall 1977 issue of *Womanart*, a magazine with a tiny circulation. Thirty-six years later, when I happened to meet Aylon at a benefit for the Women's Caucus for Art, she told me she still had the original tape of her interview and sent me a copy. It proved to be as fascinating as Aylon had said. With her encouragement, I transcribed and edited it for publication here.

Left to right, artist  
Calvert Coggeshall,  
Parsons and then  
assistant Jack Tilton in  
Newcastle, Maine,  
1977. Photo Gwyn  
Metz.



HELÈNE AYLON Most dealers who begin as artists don't remain artists. Unusually, you did.

BETTY PARSONS I've been working in sculpture and painting since 1920. When I went to Paris to get a divorce, I had some money. I worked very hard with Bourdelle, seated right next to Giacometti, for years. I was extremely serious about it. My great love was sculpture—I wanted to work in stone. But I couldn't afford to hire people to help me after the stock market crashed. So I did painting and watercolors. In Santa Barbara, I taught drawing and sculpture in my own studio, and kept painting.

I knew a lot of people out there, and they introduced me to people. I had a raft of young people who used to come up from the town to study with me. They were darling, and they were dying to learn something. I was *glamour* to them because I had lived in Europe. They didn't have any money, and everyone was going communist. The wealthy gang in Santa Barbara used to call them "little Reds." It was very funny. But they were no more "red" than I was.

AYLON In Hollywood you knew Greta Garbo.

PARSONS I played tennis with her. It's interesting how we met. Her ghostwriter, Salka Viertel, asked me to come by on Christmas Eve to dress the tree. When I arrived, Salka told me to go up to the attic and help Garbo bring down a great big box full of Christmas dressing. We stared at each other over the top of the box, and that's how I met her.

The Germans always had candles on their trees, real candles. I was standing at the mantelpiece with a little glass of brandy, and Garbo came towards me with a candle she was going to put on the tree. I said, "Which one of us burns brightest, you with the candle or me with the brandy?" She got very serious, and said, "You burn much brighter than me because you burn from within." It was fascinating.

Rouben Mamoulian, the director, was her boyfriend then, and, God, was he jealous over her. So she was guarded by all these men, always. She was very interested in women. She liked women, she really liked women. I married a man who was jealous about everything. If I got enthusiastic about a book, about a flower, about a place, about a human being—*jealous*. "Don't do it! Stop." It was depressing, and I couldn't take it. Men see they really haven't got you. And that makes them jealous. And they should be, too. Friendship with a woman can be a very close relationship.

There are three things we have no control over: our birth; our emotions, if we're sincere; and our death. We are born in the world because we have to learn something through whatever we're born into. Although it might be awful. That's why it's an illusion to think that we really run our lives. We don't.

AYLON I like the idea you once mentioned about the difference between elegance and chic: that elegant people are unaware of this quality in themselves, and those who are aware are merely chic.

PARSONS I can't stand chic. Elegance is an inner thing, and chic is an outer thing.

AYLON As a young girl, did you ever imagine being an independent woman?

PARSONS I was brought up to look for a rich man. How boring can that be? "Look for a man that can support you," my family said. I never gave a hoot in hell about it. I used to go back to my room and say, "That's for Mother, but not for me. Why do I give a damn? I don't want to be loaded with all these riches—they would bore me to death."

AYLON It's so much more fun if you earn it yourself.

PARSONS Exactly, but that's the kind of mores they had for years. But that's all going to change now. That's changing rapidly, I think.

AYLON Yes.

PARSONS In terms of my galleries, I never thought about whether the artist was a male or a female. I always thought, "Are they good or not good?"

AYLON And in your personal life?

PARSONS I was very critical of men because there were so many boring males around me. They were athletic, rich and aggressive, and they were insensitive, and I didn't like any part of it. I've had plenty of crushes on women.

AYLON Did you worry about people finding out about it?



Parsons: *Moonlight—Maine*, 1972, acrylic on canvas, 24 by 20 inches. Courtesy Spanierman Modern, New York.

PARSONS I was always discreet. I was brought up in a very New England [type of] background, where you never showed to the public what you felt. I remember my mother saying to me when I was in my teens, "Betty, it doesn't much matter what you do, but *never* get found out."

AYLON The whole new attitude is "let it all hang out." It's good not to be controlled.

PARSONS Well, that can be overdone, too, though. I believe in a certain amount of privacy that creates a tension that's important. I believe in tension. If you're painting a picture, and it has no tension, it has no excitement. Love creates tension because you have no idea if you're going to please or not please. Tension enhances life. You just don't want to overdo it.

AYLON But honesty is a pleasure.

PARSONS Truth is too sacred to tell.

AYLON Did you go as far as you wanted in your life, or imagined you would?

PARSONS I've always pursued the creative world, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually. Once I got a divorce, I got on my own, and I've earned my own living ever since. I never take a cent out of the gallery because I never make enough. What I make in sales of my own artwork pays for my studio out on Long Island. But I never have any capital—except pictures. Every now and then I get in a hassle financially. I sell one and it pays my bills, and I go off again. That's the way I run my life.

AYLON Every weekend you're out on Long Island.

PARSONS That's where I work. And I work like mad.

AYLON Saturday is a big day at the gallery.

PARSONS I'm usually never there. I have Saturday, Sunday and Monday off.

AYLON Your sculptures are like secret dwellings, little magical places.

PARSONS I have that Irish thing in me. I've always been fascinated with what I call "the invisible presence." That is what I am intrigued with. I am conscious of it while I'm working.

I think my nature is naturally abstract. Once when Richard Tuttle had a show, a lady said to me, "I can't understand any of these abstract things." And I said, "The most permanent thing in this world is the

invisible; you never get away from it." And I didn't know that little Tuttle was right behind me, and he heard this. He came up and kissed me on both cheeks. He said, "That's *exactly* what I'm doing, trying to capture the invisible."

AYLON You're very casual about your own career. You seem to have no ego.

PARSONS The thing is, I was so interested in other artists, it always cooled me off on myself. When I'm not at the gallery, my own art is my relaxation. That's my greatest joy. Because I get so much out of doing it, I never think so much about promoting it.

Ad Reinhardt was awfully cute about my work. One day he said to me, "Betty, why don't you show in the gallery?" I said, "I don't want to show in the gallery. There's enough Betty Parsons going on with all of you." And he said, "You go away; take a trip and I'll show your work and sell it. You're much better than most of the artists you've got."

I didn't expect much from myself. I just had an urge to do it, and that gave me the courage.

Arshile Gorky taught me a hell of a lot. I had a class with him— Hedda Sterne was also in it. He said: "You're all getting too skillful. As soon as you start to get too facile, remember to remain sensitive. Seeking, always seeking."

AYLON It must be a good feeling to be Betty Parsons. That stands for a lot. Did your assurance come naturally?

PARSONS It came gradually, because I was very, very shy. As I experienced life, I found certain values that were me.

AYLON When you found Jackson Pollock and Ad Reinhardt, were people skeptical? Did they trust you by that time?

PARSONS Being an artist myself, I always got on with my artists. A lot of them fell in love with me. Their names will be nameless. My great problem was I never had any money. I wouldn't have lost any of them if I could have kept subsidizing them the way Janis could. They had to go because I couldn't sell them. If I'd had money, I'm sure they would have all stuck to me, because they all believed in me and liked



Parsons: *African Village*, 1981, mixed mediums on wood, 12¾ by 21 by 5 inches. Courtesy Spanierman Modern.

me. It really was a financial thing.

AYLON Did being a woman interfere with your relationships with the artists?

PARSONS Hans Hofmann left the gallery because he thought I was too young, and also because I was a woman. So he went over to Sam Kootz. A lot of the artists did. They had more confidence in his ability to promote them than they did with me—this was after I'd given them their names.

AYLON You did all the groundwork.

PARSONS That's been the story of my life. I first started on my own at the Wakefield Gallery. They gave me my head, and I did fairly well there. My next job came from Mortimer Brandt. I learned a lot from him. He was a shrewd, smart, tough dealer. I remember pulling some of his own tricks on him, and he was shocked. And I said, "Morty, *you* taught me that." You have to play their game, according to the level you're on. Otherwise they'd do you in.

AYLON Were there any women who inspired you?

PARSONS Margaret Mead. I think she's fantastic. She was in gallery the other day. God, what an extraordinary woman!

AYLON I think it's interesting that your gallery directors were people who were going to impose.

PARSONS I don't want an aggressive dealer shouting at me. I had to have some men, because pictures are physically very heavy to move around. I have this young boy working for me now who is very strong—Jack Tilton. I call him my puppy.

AYLON Do you feel the feminist movement should deal with the problems of getting along with men, and not be separate?

PARSONS I think the whole point of life, as dear old Shakespeare said, "Their going hence, even as their coming hither: Ripeness is all."

AYLON Ripeness?

PARSONS To be integrated, to be ripe, to go on. We're all part of everything.

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