

Betty Parsons's 2 Lives: She Was Artist, Too

By CAROL STRICKLAND
Published: June 28, 1992

BETTY PARSONS, born in 1900, grew up amid luxury, with homes in New York, Newport and Palm Beach. When she was a child, a fleet of cars emblazoned with the family crest whisked her to Miss Chapin's School and then finishing school.

As a newlywed, she traveled through Europe on a nine-month honeymoon in a chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce. But it was not until she lost her fortune that Betty Parsons found her fate, to be, as Ellsworth Kelly said, "an extraordinary woman in the history of modern art."

Disinherited after her divorce, Mrs. Parsons made history on her own. Operating on nothing but her own convictions, she became a legendary art dealer, championing the New York avant-garde in the years after World War II.

From 1946 until her death in 1982, Mrs. Parsons ran the Betty Parsons Gallery in Manhattan, which represented leading names in modern American art. She showed work by Abstract Expressionists like Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still, as well as succeeding generations of innovators like Mr. Kelly; Agnes Martin, the minimalist, and Richard Tuttle, the Postminimalist sculptor.

"Betty and her gallery helped construct the center of the art world," said Helen Frankenthaler, the painter, who met Parsons in 1950. "She was one of the last of her breed."

Mrs. Parsons's role as a leading promoter of abstract art is well known. Less well known is that she was an artist.

"Betty led a double life," a nephew, William P. Rayner, said. "Being an artist was her first priority. That's why she was such a good dealer and that's why her artists liked her."

This summer three institutions on Long Island are exhibiting Mrs. Parsons's work. One, the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center of East Hampton, is showing her paintings on paper through July 25. The Fine Arts Gallery of the Southampton Campus of Long Island University is exhibiting painted wood "constructions" through July 29, and the Benton Gallery of Southampton is host for an exhibition of oils and works on paper through July 9.

On July 11, L.I.U. at Southampton sponsors a symposium on Mrs. Parsons.

The events are "a fine tribute to someone who has done so much for art," said Arlene Bujese, director of the Benton.

As an artist, Mrs. Parsons is very underrated, said Helen A. Harrison, director of the Pollock-Krasner House, who added, "There's much more to her legacy than her nurturing other artists."

Works that Mrs. Parsons created on Long Island are the focus of the L.I.U. show. She collected scraps of wood that washed ashore on the beach in front of her studio in Southold and painted and assembled them into constructions.

The director of the Fine Arts Gallery, Roy Nicholson, said the the works were serious pieces, but with a sense of humor. With titles like "Sailing Through the Sound" and "Whaling," the abstract geometric wall sculptures have "references that hook you into the Long Island environment," he added.

In her waterfront studio on the North Shore, which Tony Smith designed in 1959, Mrs. Parsons worked on her art in her time off from the gallery. The house-studio, where Mrs. Parsons died on July 23, 1982, is "an extraordinarily elegant fisherman's shack," said Lee Hall, author of a new biography, "Betty Parsons: Artist, Dealer, Collector" (Harry N. Abrams, 1991).

Perched on a cliff overlooking Long Island Sound, "it's clearly a coastal house with great views," said Ms. Hall, a former president of the Rhode Island School of Design. Furniture on Wheels

The studio fully exploits its spectacular setting. Its windows at different heights capture light as the sun's angle shifts, and the furniture, on wheels, could be rotated to face the sunset in any season.

Edward Albee, the playwright, recalled visiting Mrs. Parsons at Southold, where she roamed the pebble beach collecting shells and wood. "She seemed more in her element there than running the gallery," Mr. Albee said. Gwyn Metz, an interior designer who had been Mrs. Parsons's gallery assistant, said, "It was a real retreat for her."

Another artist, Jack Youngerman, said: "Betty moved to the North Fork to get away from the socializing on the South Fork. Even in her 70's, she swam nude. She was a free soul."

Many people in the art world attribute Mrs. Parsons's success to her free-thinking. Ann Gibson, an associate professor of art history at the State University at Stony Brook, has studied the sexual politics of the Betty Parsons Gallery. Mrs. Parsons, a lesbian, "was very interested in diversity and showing all different kinds of things," Ms. Gibson said, "which allowed her to see the value of new work and stick by her guns." 'Not Just About Stardom'

Yet that openness might have also spurred the artists whom Mrs. Parsons called the giants, Newman, Pollock, Rothko and Still, to leave her gallery. When they insisted that Mrs. Parsons drop obscure artists to concentrate on selling their works, she refused.

"She felt art should be democratic," said Jack Tilton, a former assistant to Mrs. Parsons who directs the Jack Tilton Gallery in the old Parsons space at 24 West 57th Street in Manhattan. "The gallery was not just about stardom and making money. She wanted to show what she wanted to show."

One by one the "giants" deserted Mrs. Parsons for more commercial dealers, who sold their work aggressively when collectors and curators began to recognize the New York School.

"She was resentful," said an art critic, B. H. Friedman, who interviewed Mrs. Parsons for his biography of Pollock in 1972. "She had struggled so long to get them established, and other dealers capitalized on her efforts." Lacking Business and Sales Savvy

The genteel Mrs. Parsons undeniably lacked sales savvy. "One couldn't be a Betty Parsons and at the same time be a good businesswoman," said a colleague, Leo Castelli. "She was much too sweet and poetic for that. But she loved those painters and would have liked to do better for them."

Another art critic, Clement Greenberg, said, "She wasn't a saleswoman, but she had flair." Mr. Greenberg, one of the first people to discover the artists later known as Abstract Expressionists, added: "There was a certain atmosphere around these artists that Betty was in touch with and maybe part of it, too."

Even though Mrs. Parsons failed to sell much work in the early days of the gallery, she helped engineer a turning point in art history. Just by exhibiting advanced American art

when no one else would touch it, Mrs. Parsons catalyzed a pivotal power shift. After World War II, the School of Paris, led by Picasso, which had dominated world art for half a century, gave way to the New York School, led by Parsons artists like Pollock and Rothko, along with others like Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline.

"It was the beginning of a great moment in American art that started there at Betty Parsons's," Mr. Castelli said. "For the first time a great original art movement took place in America."

Leon Polk Smith, the painter, remembers guiding Eleanor Roosevelt around an exhibition of his abstract paintings at the Betty Parsons Gallery in the 1950's. More sympathetic than most, the President's wife told him, "I'm learning to understand modern art."

For many, however, the progressive art that Mrs. Parsons dared to show was so innovative that the public, and many critics, reacted with jeers and hostility. Some gallerygoers even penciled obscenities on the canvases.

"People would slash the paintings," Hedda Sterne, the painter, recalled. "Everybody was telling Betty everything she showed was nonsense, but she had the courage of her opinions. Faith was her essential quality, faith in herself, in what she was doing and in the importance of art." 'Looking for Freshness'

At a time when the market for avant-garde American art was minuscule, Mrs. Parsons was the lone dealer willing to represent artists like Pollock after another dealer, Peggy Guggenheim, who first showed his work, had left New York for Italy.

"Betty took a lot of risks," said Mr. Youngerman, whom Mrs. Parsons discovered in Paris and gave his first New York show in 1958. "She was looking for freshness, provocativeness."

Richard Pousette-Dart, who exhibited his paintings at the Parsons gallery for years, said, "Betty showed people because she believed in them and championed things that weren't appreciated, the new, the creative, the far out."

"Betty was enormously perspicacious, brighter and more advanced than others," Mr. Albee said.

Her friends recall her with undiminished affection. "She left a very good taste, like something good you smelled or tasted or saw that increased in importance in memory," said Saul Steinberg, who exhibited at her gallery for years.

Richard Tuttle said: "Betty was a hero to me. Americans have gained a lot by sloughing off European complexity, but they can seem empty. Betty was American, but she had something inside her, too."

Mrs. Parsons worked nonstop on her art until her death from a stroke at the age of 82. "Betty steadily grew and improved as a person and an artist," Ms. Sterne said. "She was in a state of becoming until the end."

Photos: An untitled work, above, and "Self-Portrait (1950,)" below at right, both by Betty Parsons, right, on beach at Southold. (Lee Hall, 1975; photographs from the Pollock-Krasner House)