June 9, 1975

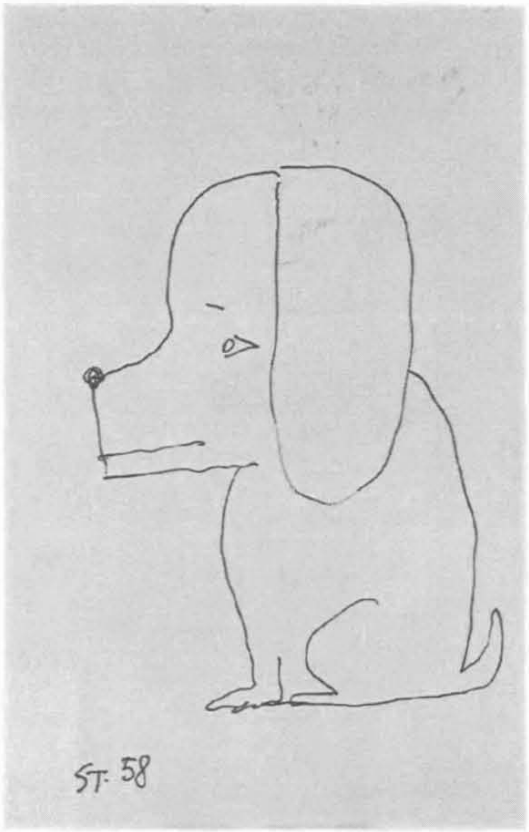
THE NEW YORKER

Price 60 cents

PROFILES

A KEEPER OF THE TREASURE

IN twenty-nine years as an independent art dealer, Betty Parsons has always been happiest when showing the unfamiliar. It takes only a year or so these days for the unfamiliar image or style in art to become familiar and accepted, and a good many of Mrs. Parsons' artists have been with her a good deal longer than that, but one cannot help feeling that her boundless enthusiasm is directed mainly toward her latest discoveries. Last September, for example, Mrs. Parsons opened the new season with a show by Bill Taggart, a young, relatively unknown painter—this was his first one-man show at the Betty Parsons Gallery—and a follower of none of the currently fashionable avant-garde austerities. Taggart paints large, colorful, quirky abstractions whose general effect is exuberant. "I've had my eye on him for several years, and I've bought a few of his things myself," Mrs. Parsons told a friend at the opening. "He has a wonderful childlike quality—you see how he sticks those little blocks of color from a child's paint set right to the canvas and then blows water across them somehow to get that rainbow effect? He's got humor and vitality. Anyway, last spring I just decided to go ahead and give him a show—bang, like that."



Betty Parsons

Vitality is a quality that appeals very much to Betty Parsons, for obvious reasons. At the age of seventy-five, she usually manages to seem twenty years younger than anyone else in the room. Her conversation is brisk and telegraphic—ask her a question and she will give you, in her deep voice, a reply so succinct, and often so striking, that further discussion is superfluous. She is always going somewhere or coming back from somewhere. "I've had a marvellous summer," she said earlier that same afternoon, sitting at her tiny, cluttered desk in a dark corner of the storeroom that serves as her office at the Parsons Gallery, on the third floor at 24 West Fifty-seventh Street. "In June, I went to London and Paris, saw the Morris Louis show at the Hayward and the Miró at the Grand Palais and a lot of other things, and bought a painting by a young Chinese named Dui Seid. Both his parents are Chinese, but he was brought up in France—interesting background. I'd like to show him one day. Then I went down to Poitiers and stayed with a friend who's doing a book on Romanesque art. We went around to a dozen or more Romanesque churches, and I loved it—the first time in ages I've been able to stay in the middle of the French countryside. After Europe, I went out to Wyoming for three weeks and stayed with my friend Hope Williams, who has a ranch near Cody. I did a lot of painting there. And then I was at my cottage in Maine for two weeks. I love to travel, and I'm delighted to find that I can still do it."

Being an artist herself makes Mrs. Parsons something of a rarity among art dealers. She has had more than a dozen solo exhibitions of her work, including major retrospectives at the Whitechapel Gallery, in London, in 1968, and at the Montclair Art Museum, in New Jersey, in 1974. Wherever she goes, she carries along a four-by-six-inch sketchbook, and makes rapid watercolor sketches—of landscapes, patterns of light and shade, shapes and rhythms and fleeting impressions of all kinds—which often provide the basis for her abstract paintings. At the theatre or at a concert, she will often pull out her sketchbook and jot something down—a few lines of verse that have come to her, or a shape or color that strikes her eye. (She carries in her handbag, along with the sketchbook, a tiny bottle of water and a bunch of watercolor crayons.) An old friend, Annie Laurie Witzel, reports that when they went to see the musical "Candide" Mrs. Parsons' enjoyment of it was somewhat dampened by the fact that the action went on all around her in the theatre and this made it difficult for her to sketch. "I like to get it down before it gets away," she says.

Jock Truman, her associate at the gallery for the last thirteen years, is a connoisseur of Mrs. Parsons' vitality. "Betty vibrates, and this place vibrates because of her," he said a while back. "Betty's fantastic commitment to life affects all of us here—me, Gwyn Metz, who's been with us two years, Debbie Lawrence, and Arthur Pierson, who happens to be Betty's cousin. It's amazing how she's influenced my life. When I came here, it was as though everything I'd done before became useful. Until then, it had seemed like a lot of unrelated failures and messing around." Truman had spent much of the previous few months overseeing renovations of a new gallery, on the fifth floor in the building—two floors up from their regular space. Last spring's New Talent exhibition at the Parsons Gallery had received such a favorable response that they decided to take additional space in order to show new work that was impossible to fit into the schedule otherwise. The fifth-floor addition, which will show drawings and other works on paper, is called the Parsons-Truman Gallery, and it was originally supposed to be

mainly Jock Truman's responsibility, but as soon as Mrs. Parsons returned from her summer's travels she became very excited about it, and insisted on showing the new space off to everyone who came by. "We opened it with a show of Walter Murch drawings," Truman said last September. "He's one of Betty's old-timers—he died seven years ago—and, of course, Betty hung the show. Something marvellous happens when she hangs a show of Murch or of Paul Feeley—a kind of direct contact between her and the work. I've learned that the best thing is just to leave her alone with it."

BETTY PARSONS has not always hung the shows in her gallery. There was a time, in the late forties and the early fifties, the gallery's heroic period, when Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and Barnett Newman used to help hang each other's shows there—shows that changed the course of modern art not only in America but internationally. The gallery was at 15 East Fifty-seventh Street then, and the roster of artists who showed there reads like a pantheon of American art. In addition to the big four already mentioned, there were Hans Hofmann and Ad Reinhardt, Theodoros Stamos and Richard Pousette-Dart, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Saul Steinberg, Buffie Johnson, and Alfonso Ossorio. Later, she showed Robert Rauschenberg, Anne Ryan, Kenzo Okada, Ellsworth Kelly, Jack Youngerman, Eduardo Paolozzi, Alexander Liberman, Paul Feeley, Agnes Martin, and many others. "No gallery anywhere has equalled her record," the critic Lawrence Campbell wrote in 1973, in *ARTnews*, and he added that the atmosphere of the Parsons Gallery had always been different from that of other galleries. "It is more like an artist's coöperative," he wrote, "except that the spectrum of styles and talents is much wider than most artist's juries would permit."

Artists have always felt at ease with Betty Parsons, perhaps in part because, being an artist herself, she has always been far more interested in the artist than in the client, in the work of art than in its sale. It is generally assumed that this is also why so many of her important artists have left her. She didn't try hard enough to sell their work, some of them said. Instead of committing herself totally to the artists of the Abstract Expressionist breakthrough, she kept discovering new people. Truman disputes the poor-sales myth. "A few years ago, I went back over our records of the forties and fifties," he said. "Pollock made six thousand dollars in 1950, which wasn't bad then, and Rothko made almost three thousand dollars. When Rothko went to Sidney Janis, he made less than that the first year. Of course, time was on the artists' side, and eventually their prices had to go up. It's true, though, that Betty's has never been a star-system gallery. And Betty doesn't go out and hound people the way some dealers do."

It is also true that the gallery does not send out press releases, that it advertises sparingly, and that, while it has done reasonably good business for nearly three decades, it has never made a great profit. "Most artists don't think I'm tough enough," Mrs. Parsons conceded recently. "That I don't go out and solicit, call up people all the time. I don't. I know how people hate that sort of thing, because I hate it myself, so I don't do it. I also think that a lot of artists would have been better off if they'd stayed with me. Maybe not financially but professionally. Becoming famous can be a terrific responsibility. Richard Lindner was with me for five years. I gave him three shows, and couldn't sell him. Finally, we wept on each other's shoulder and decided he would be better off somewhere else. He went eventually to Cordier & Ekstrom, and that same year Pop Art arrived and Lindner began selling like hotcakes. Lindner has something of Pop in him, although he's not a Pop artist. Anyway, that's been the story of my life."

With one or two exceptions, the artists who left remained her friends. Some never did leave. Ad Reinhardt stayed for twenty-one years, even though for

"Everything was truly great, sir. How did we do?"

the first ten the gallery sold under six thousand dollars' worth of his paintings. Tomlin was with her until he died, and the gallery now represents his estate. Kenzo Okada, the most successful of her current crop in terms of sales, has been with her for twenty-two years, and Saul Steinberg and Hedda Sterne, both of whom Mrs. Parsons first showed in 1943, when she was running the Wakefield Gallery, have been with her ever since—although Steinberg continues his practice, begun when Parsons and Sidney Janis shared the same floor of the building at 15 East Fifty-seventh, of showing his work at both galleries simultaneously. Steinberg is very fond of Betty Parsons, who nevertheless strikes him as being not quite real. "One of the attractive things about Betty is that she resembles fiction more than anything else," he said not long ago. "She exists in the way that Raskolnikov exists, or Julien Sorel. The profession of art dealer is very difficult, very delicate. A dealer is the intermediary between two of the most important things in life—money and fame—and the fact that Betty is a fictional character makes it easier to deal with her, although it also makes things less precise. Janis, now, is completely brass tacks. But there is a Faustian quality about dealers, because of their having to deal with fame and money. They become strange, like swans or giraffes. It is good for a dealer to have a fictional side. The best dealers are like Nibelungs, keepers of the treasure. They are remote. Betty is like that." Steinberg once drew a profile portrait of Mrs. Parsons as a dog—"an adoring, serenading dog," as he put it. Everyone, including Mrs. Parsons, agrees that it is an extraordinary likeness. "She has that slightly bulging, philosophical forehead," Steinberg explains. "The forehead of Leonardo da Vinci, and of babies, and of this dog—is it a spaniel? If you look at Betty, you see the Sphinx, the Garbo-like quality, the remoteness. And, strictly *entre nous*, the Sphinx *is* doggy." To another observer, Mrs. Parsons might seem, with her aristocratic features and intonation, her quick, graceful way of moving, and her quiet little explosions of mirth, more closely related to some exceptionally independent breed of cat. There are moments during a crowded opening at her gallery when she can be seen standing entirely alone, hands clasped behind her back, blue eyes missing nothing—a trim figure so self-contained, so centered, that others appear insubstantial beside her. She dresses like no one else, usually in slacks and a loose jacket, but with a stylish touch of color—a scarf at the throat. She loves to dance. On the island of Saint Martin, where she has a house, the employees at a nearby inn called Mary's Fancy line up on New Year's Eve to dance with Betty Parsons, whose fame as a calypso partner has spread far and wide. "She dances her way through life," Hedda Sterne once said of her. "She has a fantastic ability to adjust to new realities, and she is always graceful."

"I've led several different lives," Mrs. Parsons remarked one day. "Fortunately, I have enjoyed all of them."

ONE of Betty Parsons' great-great-great-great-grandfathers, Abraham Pierson, Jr., was the first rector of Yale. Subsequent generations of Piersons manufactured industrial machinery at a plant near Tuxedo Park, wintered in Palm Beach, summered at Newport, and maintained a large house at 17 West Forty-ninth Street, where she was born, in 1900. (The site is now part of Rockefeller Center.) Convention ranked high in their scale of values. "When my grandfather heard I was getting a divorce, in 1922, he demanded to see me," Mrs. Parsons recalls. "It was the first divorce in the family. 'Does he drink?' he asked me. I said he did. 'Does he beat you?' I said that he didn't beat me but that we were incompatible. 'That's not enough,' he said, and he cut me out of his will because of it. My mother's side of the family was partly French—thank God for the French! The William Porcher Mileses, of New Orleans and Charleston. They were intellectual but not artistic. They had a great library, and they lived in a fantastic house on Old River Road, and they all drank a great deal. Whenever I go down there now, they fill me full of bourbon. In the old days, I'm told, they used to think nothing of drinking juleps before breakfast. My mother and my older sister, though, were great intellectuals, always telling me facts about the past, and I hated it. I think that's what made me so anti-historical."

The three Pierson girls—Betty had a younger sister as well as an older one, but no brothers—were much admired in Newport and Palm Beach. Jeanne Reynal, a slightly younger contemporary who became an artist and has shown at the Parsons Gallery, remembers that when they were in their teens she and her Newport friends thought Betty was just about *it*. "She had a real peaches-and-cream complexion and a trim figure, her eyes were like delft, she played damn good tennis and she swam beautifully, and she always seemed to be surrounded by the most attractive men. Later on, I used to call her Lady Elizabeth Pierson Parsons—she seemed like those great English aristocrats who take for granted what they are. It's interesting that Betty never really broke with all that. She just seemed to widen her horizon to include other worlds."

In those days, Newport was more or less impervious to the world of art. "In our house and in all those big Newport houses, you saw the most wonderful crystal, and china, and flowers, and great, huge pieces of furniture, but never any paintings," Mrs. Parsons recalls. "There was so much complicated molding on the walls that you couldn't have hung a picture if you had wanted to." At the Chapin School, in New York, and later at Miss Randall McKeever's Finishing School there, art was somewhat more

OWL

There's a roof over me I cannot see,
The branches of a tree
Hung with Chinese characters, and an owl
Huddled in its center like a seed.
Even now I scratch myself awake
The way I've seen the forest scratch its skin
From brown to green. When I am
Quite tired, and the lake in front of me
Spreads out like a thin map of the moon,
Reason is nothing
More than the distance home.

—VICKIE KARP

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"This is turning out to be such a high-minded meeting it would be a shame if someone didn't leak it to the press."

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visible, if not yet wholly respectable. It was the Armory Show in 1913 that first gave Betty Pierson, who was thirteen when she visited it, the idea that she wanted to be an artist. "I'd always thought that the Old Masters were much too advanced—that I'd never be able to catch up to them," she said recently. "But then I saw those things at the Armory, and I thought, Here's where I can get on board."

The Piersons disapproved of college for women, so Betty didn't go. Instead, she wangled permission to spend the winter of 1918-19 studying sculpture in New York with Gutzon Borglum, the tormentor of Mt. Rushmore, whom she remembers as being a terrible teacher. "When he'd have us draw a bone, he'd make us draw it from his sketchbook—we couldn't even draw a real bone." In the spring of 1919, she married Schuyler Livingston Parsons, who was wealthy, conservative, socially prominent, and ten years older than she was. They spent their honeymoon in Paris, and returned in the fall to take up housekeeping in an apartment at 15 West Fifty-fifth Street and at a country place in Islip. "Parsons was a nice guy," she recalls, "but he drank." The new Mrs. Parsons spent a good deal of her time that winter at the studio of Mary Tonetti, the sculptor. She still has, in her New York apartment, a little plaster cast of a Neptune that she modelled in that studio. "Sculpture was my ideal," she has said. "Painting came more easily to me, but I was always more drawn to sculpture." She also attended classes at the Parsons School of Design (no connection with her in-laws), and was later offered a job as a clothes designer at thirty-five dollars a week; her in-laws insisted that she decline it.

The marriage lasted a little more than two years. Grandfather Pierson's ire did not prevent the couple from achieving a highly amicable divorce, with Mrs. Parsons going to Paris so that the decree would be granted there, on the ground of mutual incompatibility. It was the turning point in her life. She stayed on in Paris for ten years, living on the Left Bank and working in a studio on the Rue Perçeval. She had made up her mind to be an artist. It was a fine time to be in Paris, of course, and she got to know most of the livelier people: Alexander Calder, Man Ray, Jean Lurçat, Isamu Noguchi, Hart Crane, Max Jacob, Tristan Tzara, Eugene Jolas, Natalie Barney, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, Gerald and Sara Murphy, Caresse and Harry Crosby. ("Harry Crosby sent me an opium pill one Christmas. I threw it down the drain. Later, he carried out his suicide pact in the apartment of a great friend of mine in New York.") She even met Gurdjiev, the Russo-Greek mystic, whom she thought "a bit of a brigand," but who stimulated in her a lifelong interest in occult studies.

Her first six years in Paris, she studied sculpture with Antoine Bourdelle, whom she considered a better teacher than sculptor. " 'Beware of learning too much about art,' he used

"Why don't you two get acquainted?"

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to tell us, 'because it will keep you from finding your own way.' Giacometti was in the same class, but we were both so shy we hardly spoke. Once, Bourdelle said that Giacometti and I were the only ones who were trying to say something about the model, not just copying." After Bourdelle, she studied with Ossip Zadkine, mainly to learn the use of different kinds of sculptural materials. "But Zadkine imposed Zadkine on you, so I left," she says. Every summer, she went to Brittany to study watercolor technique with the English painter Arthur Lindsey. The Galerie des Quatre Chemins gave her a solo show of watercolors in 1927. She might have stayed on in France indefinitely if it hadn't been for the Crash.

Mrs. Parsons' father, who had forsaken the family machinery works for Wall Street, was hard hit in 1929; so was Schuyler Parsons, and he stopped sending his modest alimony payments. Mrs. Parsons nevertheless stayed on until 1933, and then, like most of the expatriates, she came home—not to New York, though. Acting on the advice of friends, she went to California, settling first in Hollywood and then in Santa Barbara. She supported herself by giving lessons in drawing and sculpture, and by painting portraits on commission. She also worked for a time in a liquor store in Santa Barbara, where her knowledge of French wines was a great boon to butlers for the larger estates, and she continued her studies in sculpture by working with Aleksandr Archipenko, the Russian émigré, who was then living in Los Angeles. It was a good time to be in Hollywood. Robert Benchley, whom she and other friends used to call Parthenon, because he seemed so much bigger and better than anyone else, introduced her to the film colony, and she got to know Charles Butterworth and Marlene Dietrich, and played tennis with Greta Garbo. (Mrs. Parsons, with her straight hair, slim hips, and classic, slightly severe features, would sometimes hear young bucks call out "Hiya, G.G.!" and wonder what they meant. In New York today, she is still occasionally mistaken for Garbo.) She was asked about this time to join an informal American tennis team that would be playing in major amateur tournaments here and abroad, but the prospect did not appeal to her. She also met Martha Graham, whose work she has followed with great enthusiasm ever since. "I always wanted to get back to New York, though," Mrs. Parsons said not long ago. "I didn't really like California that well. I met a lot of people who became great friends, but the atmosphere was depressing. There was such heavy drinking all the time. Finally, I sold my engagement ring for a thousand dollars—I knew Schuyler had paid a lot more than that for it—and came back East."

SOON after her return to New York, Mrs. Parsons had a show of her work at the Midtown Gallery, and sold a number of pictures from it. But the proceeds were hardly enough to live on, so when Alan Gruskin, the Midtown's director, invited her to arrange exhibitions there and to sell for the gallery on a commission basis, she agreed. The next year, she went to work, also on a commission basis, for Mrs. Cornelius J. Sullivan, one of the three "founding mothers" (as Russell Lynes has called them) of the Museum of Modern Art, who had a gallery at 460 Park Avenue and sold nineteenth-century and twentieth-century art. Early in 1940, Mrs. Parsons was approached by the owners of the Wakefield Bookshop, at 64 East Fifty-fifth Street, with the suggestion that she establish an art gallery in the bookshop's empty basement. She did so, and was in complete charge of the Wakefield Gallery, which opened that autumn. For the first year or so, she showed mostly the work of book illustrators (Ludwig Bemelmans among them), but she had a keen and curious eye, and before long she was showing artists who did more than illustrate: Walter Murch and Alfonso Ossorio in 1941, Joseph Cornell in 1942, Saul Steinberg, Constantine Nivola, Hedda Sterne, and Theodoros Stamos in 1943, and Adolph Gottlieb in 1944. (Gottlieb

had shown Surrealist work elsewhere, but his first abstract pictures appeared at the Wakefield.)

The early nineteen-forties were a critical period of transition in American art. "American scene" regionalism, on the one hand, and post-Cubist, geometric abstraction, on the other, had come to seem increasingly inadequate modes of dealing with contemporary reality. The war in Europe, moreover, had ended the isolation of American artists by bringing some of the leading European Surrealists as refugees to this country, where they came into close contact with the younger New York artists. The creative ferment of those years led to a number of developments in painting that have been lumped together, somewhat misleadingly, as Abstract Expressionism. Mark Rothko's floating rectangles of color and Barnett Newman's vertical divisions of space are hardly Expressionistic, and in a sense their work stands at a polar remove from Jackson Pollock's or Willem de Kooning's explosive encounters with paint and canvas. All four of these artists passed through somewhat similar aesthetic crises, however, and each arrived at a radical new style whose effect on the viewer was aggressive, immediate, and often overwhelming. Their paintings had an all-at-once visual impact that was entirely new in Western art; Pollock's friend Tony Smith, an architect who later became an important sculptor, once said that the only comparable aesthetic experience he could think of would be to come suddenly, after wandering in the desert, upon the great gate of a mosque. It took several years for the new painting to lose its shock effect and be seen for what it was, but in the period when it was coming into being New York emerged as the energy center of modern art. For the third time in her life, Betty Parsons had managed to be in the right place at the right time.

Beginning in 1942, Peggy Guggenheim, who had been married to the European Surrealist painter Max Ernst, showed most of the advanced American artists at her Art of This Century gallery, at 30 West Fifty-seventh Street in New York, along with work by Ernst, Masson, Arp, Giacometti, and other Europeans. The critics were more or less appalled by it. Pollock's furious abstract calligraphy seemed insane to most of those who came to his first one-man show, at Art of This Century, in 1943, but artists alive to the new currents were profoundly affected; as de Kooning said afterward, Pollock had broken the ice. Having spent ten years in Paris, Mrs. Parsons knew the background of what was taking place, and although she had not yet made her own breakthrough into the abstract—she was still doing mostly impressionistic landscapes then—she was artist enough to recognize the validity and the power of the new painting. "I realized that they were saying something that no European could say," she reflected a few months ago. "Europe is a walled city—at least, it's always seemed that way to me. Everything is within walls. Picasso could never have done what Pollock did. Pollock released the historical imagination of this country. I've always thought that the West was an important factor in the art of the forties and fifties here. Pollock came from Wyoming, Clyfford Still grew up in North Dakota, and Rothko in Oregon—all those enormous spaces. They were all trying to convey the expanding world."

The Wakefield Bookshop moved uptown in 1944, and Mrs. Parsons moved to the Mortimer Brandt Gallery, at 15 East Fifty-seventh Street. Brandt dealt in Old Masters, but he wanted to open a modern section, and he had been advised that Betty Parsons was the person to run it. Two years later, looking back over her sales figures, he thought better of the idea. Brandt moved to another building and told Mrs. Parsons to do whatever she liked with the space at 15 East Fifty-seventh. Mrs. Parsons, for whom sales were not the main issue, had begun to think that she might have some real ability as a dealer, and she decided that it was time to establish a gallery of her own. The Betty Parsons Gallery opened in the fall of 1946. Her entire working capital came to fifty-five hundred dollars—a thousand of her own, and the remainder from four of her friends. Her real capital was in artists. Peggy Guggenheim closed her gallery in 1947 and went to live in Venice, so Pollock and the other Americans she had shown were left in a precarious position. There were not many modern-art galleries in New York then, and certainly not more than two or three that would consider handling their work. Betty Parsons had already shown Rothko, Hofmann, and Reinhardt at the Brandt Gallery. Pollock, Rothko, Newman, and Still wanted to remain together as a group, and they decided that summer to go to the Parsons Gallery. Mrs. Parsons remembers having a conversation at about this time with Curt Valentin, who was then the most respected dealer in the country. "He asked me what I thought about these new artists, and I said I thought they were fascinating," she recalls. " 'I must be going blind,' he said. 'I

can't see them at all.' So I got them—they would all probably rather have gone with Curt."

Barnett Newman was Mrs. Parsons' "inspiration and guide," as she puts it, during the early years of the gallery. She had met him in 1944, at a dinner party at the Adolph Gottliebs', and they had taken to one another right away. Newman was a native New Yorker, a genial, articulate, immensely well-read man, whose horizons stretched well beyond the art world. He could talk brilliantly on almost any subject—philosophy, religion, baseball, politics (he had even run for mayor of New York in 1933, against LaGuardia and others)—to the point where some of his fellow-artists considered him more of an aesthetic theorist than an artist. (This always irritated Newman, who once observed that "aesthetics is for artists as ornithology is for the birds.") Like a number of the other American artists who would forge the revolutionary new art of the forties and fifties, Newman had in the early forties come to an impasse in his own work; he did not make his breakthrough until 1948, when he began to paint single-color canvases cleft by one or more vertical stripes of a different color—paintings that enraged the critics even more than Pollock's networks and skeins of dripped or thrown paint. Throughout the forties, Newman was in close touch with all the important artists—he had introduced Mrs. Parsons to Pollock—and in 1943 he published an article predicting that America would become the new center of Western art.

"Spontaneous, and emerging from several points, there has arisen during the war years a new force in American painting that is the modern counterpart of the primitive art impulse," Newman wrote in 1947, in the catalogue for a groundbreaking show at Parsons called "The Ideographic Picture." It was a note that he had sounded before, when he helped Mrs. Parsons organize a show of pre-Columbian stone sculpture at the Wakefield Gallery in 1944, and again in 1946, with a Northwest Coast Indian Art show, which inaugurated the Betty Parsons Gallery. This was a stunning show, selected largely by Newman from the storerooms of the American Museum of Natural History, and one of the first shows ever to present American Indian materials for their aesthetic rather than their ethnological significance. The high quality of the objects themselves and the manner of their presentation—in a bare, white-walled room with no decoration of any kind—set the tone for a new kind of gallery, devoted to a new kind of art.

Most New York art galleries in those days followed the European pattern of sumptuous wall coverings, wall-to-wall carpets, and decorative touches suggesting opulence. Even the rooms of Alfred Barr's Museum of Modern Art had a sort of Bauhaus chic about them—an elegant spareness. The Parsons Gallery was the first to look like a contemporary artist's loft (a rather clean one), without even a potted plant to distract attention from the works of art. Mrs. Parsons had rented the space across the hall—Mortimer Brandt's old space—to Sam Kootz, who also showed contemporary art. The main gallery on her side was spacious and beautifully proportioned, not quite square, windowless, with a scrubbed wood floor. There was a smaller gallery behind it, and a tiny office. It was the ideal environment for the big, single-image, visionary paintings of the New York School.

From the beginning, it was also a place where artists felt at ease. Newman was there nearly every day, talking with anyone who came in. On Saturday afternoons, a dozen or more artists might gather in the back room and stay several hours, and then go out to dinner together. Newman, Pollock, Rothko, and Still all helped to hang each other's shows, and Betty Parsons gave them complete freedom to do so. Once, Rothko wanted to hang more pictures than the walls would accommodate; he got Tony Smith and his other artist friends together the afternoon before the opening, and they stayed in the gallery overnight building a freestanding wall and installing the rest of the show. "I give them walls," Mrs. Parsons used to say. "They do the rest." Having arrived in 1947 at his distinctive abstract image—floating rectangles of saturated color—Rothko soon started to paint mural-size canvases, which eventually grew to be as large as eleven by fifteen feet. Another dealer might have complained that it was impossible to sell a painting that big, but not Betty Parsons. "It was the expanding world they were after," she said last fall. "Barney was doing it vertically, with that great plunging line—his 'zip,' as he called it. Rothko was doing it horizontally. Reinhardt by trying to make his pictures more and more invisible, I guess. Still was always the most romantic, with those dark, jagged shapes. He always made me think of an eagle, or a stallion. And Tony Smith—his sculpture holds down the horizon."

Not many people shared Mrs. Parsons' enthusiasm for the new American painting. The establishment critics reviewed her shows with a viciousness reminiscent of the early days of Impressionism. *Life* and other magazines demanded a return to "humanism" in art, and a Republican congressman, George A. Dondero, of Michigan, saw the new abstract paintings as part of a dangerous Communist conspiracy. The Parsons Gallery, along with the galleries of Kootz and Charles Egan (where de Kooning showed), absorbed most of the abuse. "Stuart Preston, of the *Times*, came to me after the first Barney Newman show and said, 'Betty, any more shows like that and they'll throw you off the street,' " Mrs. Parsons recalls. "Another time, he came to a Clyfford Still show, got off the elevator, took one look, and got right back on it. I literally dragged him back into the gallery, and I took him into the small room, where there was one painting by Still, and I said, 'Just stay in here for five minutes, will you, please?' He stayed, and he came out grumbling that maybe there was 'something' there after all. Emily Genauer, of the *Trib*, used to ask me a lot of questions and then misconstrue everything I said. It got so that I didn't even dare talk to her. John Canaday, of the *Times*, was often very hostile. He's a nice fellow outside the art world, and a very good dancer, but he was often hostile to me because he just didn't *see* the work."

The almost universal adverse critical reaction drew the artists together. They met frequently at The Club, on Eighth Street, or at the Cedar Tavern, or at one of the galleries that showed their work. They gave each other confidence. One evening in 1951, Rothko, Newman, Pollock, and Still came

to Betty Parsons' studio apartment for dinner. She was living then in a fifth-floor walkup at 143 East Fortieth Street—a large, airy room that had seen countless similar gatherings. This time, however, the four artists ("I thought of them as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse") had come to make a serious proposal. They wanted her to drop most of the other artists in her gallery and concentrate her energies on showing and selling their work. "They said they would make me the most famous dealer in the world," Mrs. Parsons recalls. "And they were probably right. They really were paying me a great compliment. But I didn't want to do a thing like that. I told them that, with my nature, I liked a bigger garden."

The exodus began soon afterward. First Pollock and then Rothko went to Sidney Janis, who had taken the gallery across the hall from Betty Parsons in 1949, when Kootz moved out. Pollock left sadly, and gave her a painting as his parting gift. ("We were very good friends right up to the end," Mrs. Parsons once said.) Later, when she heard rumors that Still was also going to Janis, she wrote him an outspoken letter saying that he was free to go wherever he chose but asking why she had to hear about it from other people. Still wrote a furious reply, and they did not speak to one another for years afterward. Newman, deeply hurt by the vitriolic reviews of his 1951 show at Parsons, and even more by the failure of any fellow-artists to come to his defense, withdrew his pictures from the gallery and did not show again in New York for eight years. But he and Mrs. Parsons remained close friends, and he continued his advisory role at the gallery.

By 1952, the artists' solidarity had disintegrated in a series of bitter and often foolish quarrels. Newman sued Reinhardt for slander. Still, who did not go to Janis after all, quarrelled publicly with Newman. "It all went from love to hate in four years," Mrs. Parsons remembers. But the movement that had come together at Peggy Guggenheim's and had flowered at Betty Parsons' was now on the verge of its international triumph. Rothko, Pollock, Still, and Tomlin were among those included in the Museum of Modern Art's important "Fifteen Americans" group show in 1952. (Newman's exclusion from this exhibition was another factor in his decision to withdraw from the art world.) Edward Root and Duncan Phillips, the most discerning and adventurous of the collectors who frequented the Parsons Gallery, were starting to buy the work, and so were such new collectors as Ben Heller and Mrs. Burton Tremaine. By the time Pollock died—in an automobile accident, in 1956—Abstract Expressionism was the most famous and influential school of painting in the world. In December of that year, for the tenth anniversary of the Parsons Gallery, Barney Newman selected and Tony Smith hung a group of paintings and sculptures by twenty-five artists who had been or still were associated with the gallery. The critics were virtually unanimous in their praise. "Mrs. Parsons has never lacked for courage," the critic Clement Greenberg wrote in a catalogue note for the show. "It is not a virtue signally associated with art dealers . . . but then she is not, at least for me, primarily a dealer. . . . In a sense like that in which a painter is referred to as a painter's painter or a poet as a poet's poet, Mrs. Parsons' is an artist's—and critic's—gallery: a place where art goes on and is not just shown and sold."

THE fact that the Parsons Gallery had and then lost so many of the masters of Abstract Expressionism has been variously interpreted. Dorothy Miller, who was for many years the chief curator at the Museum of Modern Art, used to say, half joking, that Betty Parsons lost interest in an artist the moment he began selling at high prices. Mrs. Parsons could argue that she has never lost interest in Kenzo Okada, whose suave abstract pictures she has been selling at higher and higher prices ever since 1953. On the other hand, Jock Truman, whom she met in the spring of 1962, and took on later that year, once complained that he knew of several established artists whose pictures had been *unsold* by Mrs. Parsons' ardent proselytizing on behalf of some other gallery artist, whose work was less in demand. Richard Tuttle, whom a number of people, including Truman, consider the most important young artist on the gallery's current roster, suggested recently that a strain of competition seemed to enter into Mrs. Parsons' relationship with fully developed, mature talents. "Betty never *celebrates* an artist," Tuttle said. "It's not true that she's a bad businesswoman. She's a very good one, and she's made a lot of money for Okada and Ossorio and others. But that's not her real interest. Betty cares about growth. The gallery is unique, because she has always thought an artist should mature slowly—she used to

say she'd never show anybody under thirty-five. Betty won't push you—she cares mainly about your growth as an artist."

Artists are always changing galleries, of course, and for Mrs. Parsons the real excitement has been in making new discoveries. In 1951, she gave Robert Rauschenberg his first show, much to that young artist's astonishment; he had taken his work in to her, he said, just to get a reaction from "the best gallery in New York," and had never expected to be offered a show. (Rauschenberg, the *enfant terrible* of the fifties, who was forging a way out of Abstract Expressionism, believes that he was denied a second Parsons show because Barney Newman ruled against it; he went to the Stable Gallery, and then to Charles Egan, before settling at Leo Castelli's.) Mrs. Parsons' discoveries continued with Richard Lindner, in 1954; Ellsworth Kelly, in 1956; Jack Youngerman, in 1958; Alexander Liberman and Paul Feeley, in 1959. From 1958 to 1961, she ran an annex to the main gallery called Section Eleven, which was devoted principally (as the new Parsons-Truman Gallery is) to new talent. Ruth Vollmer showed there first, and so did Agnes Martin, whose mystical grid paintings were to have such an influence on the Minimal Art of the sixties. (Mrs. Parsons once described these pictures—composed of unbroken horizontal and vertical lines in subtly related colors—as "heartstrings pulled out, endlessly.") Most of these artists, too, have left the gallery. When Kelly said he was leaving, Mrs. Parsons told him that he was free to go anywhere he liked but that if he went to Sidney Janis she would never speak to him again. She and Janis were engaged just then in a dispute over the gallery space. Mrs. Parsons is convinced to this day that Janis went to the landlord's agent, William A. White, and made a deal, without consulting her, to rent the entire floor. Janis maintains that he did no such thing—that the agent for the landlord, informed by an inspector that it was a violation of the building safety code to have two galleries on a floor with only one, common exit, had come to Janis and offered to rent him the entire floor. At any rate, Janis agreed to take the floor, and Mrs. Parsons, who thought that as the floor's prior occupant she should have been the one approached, and who brought suit against the landlord—Vartain Realty—and Janis to this effect, unsuccessfully, was obliged to move in 1963 (after an indignant year of paying rent to Janis), and took her present space at 24 West Fifty-seventh Street. Ellsworth Kelly had meanwhile gone to Janis, and Mrs. Parsons did refuse to speak to him for years—until he moved to Castelli, in December of 1972. Now they are great friends again.

In the twenty-nine years since Betty Parsons opened her own gallery, she has shown primarily abstract painting and sculpture—Abstract Expressionism, color-field abstraction (Kelly, Youngerman), Minimal Art (Agnes Martin, Richard Tuttle), and a great many developments in between. Pop Art never got its foot in the door, although Mrs. Parsons did consent once to let Andy Warhol draw *her* foot. Warhol, who was still drawing shoe ads for I. Miller at that point (he blossomed as a Pop artist soon afterward), came to the gallery one day and asked permission to draw Mrs. Parsons' foot, which is rather narrow. Mrs. Parsons agreed, on the condition that she could go right ahead with what she was doing, and so for the next hour, while she talked on the telephone and wrote letters, she held up her right foot for Warhol to sketch. Mrs. Parsons admires the work of Warhol, whom she once described as the "murderer" of modern art, but she would never have consented to show it, because she is not comfortable with any work that she finds destructive. She also admires Claes Oldenburg. "He's a great historian, a journalistic historian," she said not long ago. "Can't you imagine in the future, when people look back at our time, they'll see Oldenburg's sculptures and say, 'Is that really a toilet?' 'Is that really a typewriter?' He's preserved all those things." But Pop Art was too literary for her taste, and she has never shown it. Perhaps for the same reason, she missed Jasper Johns, whom she now considers one of the most important artists alive. "He came to the gallery twice, in the fifties, and I turned him down," she has said. "I just couldn't see him at the time."

LIKE most dealers, Mrs. Parsons is herself a collector of art. She began buying when she ran the Wakefield Gallery—mainly the work of artists she showed or would like to show. Sometimes an artist would give her a painting to pay off a debt, and sometimes, when she knew that an artist was broke, she would go to his studio and buy something. Once, she bought two de Kooning gouaches from Charles Egan for seventy dollars, be-

cause Egan told her that de Kooning didn't have enough money to go to the dentist. Later, she began buying pre-Columbian and African sculpture. Bourdelle had introduced her to pre-Columbian art in Paris. "He asked me what nationality I was, and I told him American, and he said, 'You mean Mexican?' He said my work was so primitive it must be Mexican. Then he showed me two little pre-Columbian stone pieces, the first I'd ever seen, and they fascinated me." Mrs. Parsons' personal collection is highly eclectic and definitely nonhistorical. She lacks the exclusive and annihilating passion of the compulsive collector. "I'm not the possessive type," she said last fall. "Possession is entirely an inner thing with me. If I fall in love with a picture, then because I love it it's mine—it doesn't matter where it is or who owns it. My own collection is really just a tribute to the artists I like."

Discussing the range and catholicity of Betty Parsons' taste in a thoughtful essay on the occasion of her show at the Montclair Art Museum last year, the critic Thomas B. Hess wrote that her enthusiasm, seen over the years, "is not so much for what has come to be known as the modernist tradition, or for esthetic qualities, or even for art." He explained, "Rather she is dedicated to a rare human quality that sees visions, hears a faint music in nature, finds patterns and insights that are hidden from everyday glances, camouflaged by ordinary existence. She responds to this quality—which for want of a better word we must call 'poetic'—with seismographic delicacy." Jock Truman feels that this hits it exactly. "Betty likes a lot more things than I do," he said last fall. "We're both highly intuitive, but she's still seduced by things that I no longer think are valid. We had an argument about this the other day. I said that I wasn't interested in aesthetics, in beautiful ways of putting paint on canvas—that no matter how well it was done, that wasn't enough for me. Betty thought for a minute, and then said, 'I think it's still enough for me.' "

When Truman joined the gallery, in 1963, he decided on a secret plan of action. "My idea was to push Betty into being the star she is, and then I would step in to fill the vacuum. And that's really what has happened. She travels a lot more now than she used to, and she's more useful to the gallery travelling and meeting people than sitting here. Betty is very shy, and she resisted it at first, but she does love to travel." Over the last ten years, Mrs. Parsons has travelled extensively in Africa, Turkey, Ireland, India, and Japan, as well as all over Europe; she has built her house on Saint Martin, where she spends Christmas and Easter, and she has bought her Maine cottage, in Sheepscott. Between trips, she spends long weekends at a studio that Tony Smith built for her sixteen years ago in Southhold, Long Island, on a cliff overlooking the Sound. When she travels, she sketches so constantly and so assiduously that her friend Gordon Washburn, who has accompanied her on several trips, accuses her of hardly ever knowing what country she is in. "She doesn't care about where she is, and she never reads a guidebook," Washburn said the other day. "It's only that direct, visual contact that counts." When she is in Southhold or Saint Martin, or in Maine, she spends most of her time painting and making sculpture.

Betty Parsons painted her first abstract picture in 1947. Up until then, she had painted pretty much "what I felt about what I saw," but in 1947, while convalescing from a serious illness with her friend Wright Ludington in California, she was taken to a rodeo, "and I got so excited by it, by the color and the movement, that I went back and did an abstract painting," she says. "I couldn't have conveyed that rodeo any other way. I just suddenly saw what to do and why and how to do it." The next big change in her work came in 1966, when Jack Youngerman saw a group of flat stones that she had picked up on the beach at Southhold, brought back to the studio, and painted on with the new acrylic colors. Youngerman suggested that she consider these painted stones preliminary studies for larger oils, and she did, with the result that her pictures grew bolder and more striking in their juxtapositions of color and shape. After a 1973 trip to East Africa with her nephew William Rayner and his wife, her color became even more vibrant and intense. Mrs. Parsons often speaks of the importance of "light" in a painting. If she doesn't get light into it somehow, she says, the painting is no good. Asked what she meant by light, she thought for a moment and then said that it was a question of inner excitement. "You see a line that excites you, or a flower—the color of it or the

shape—and you work with that, and the excitement makes light. In England years ago, I spent a weekend at Lady Redding's place in Sussex. I was painting inside a greenhouse there, and Lady Redding came in and looked, and said she didn't see what on earth I saw to make me paint like that. I said, 'That flower excites the hell out of me,' and I'm trying to paint that excitement.' She saw right away what I meant."

About eight years ago, Mrs. Parsons' long-suppressed urge toward sculpture was reanimated by bits and pieces of wood that washed up on her beach at Southhold. The home-building boom along the shores of Long Island Sound provided an endless supply of these oddments and mill ends, and they began to pile up in Mrs. Parsons' studio because the shapes had attracted her. Eventually, she got the idea of painting them with acrylic colors—like the stones—and then assembling them into fanciful, striking, and sometimes hilarious combinations, to which she assigns titles in keeping with the spirit of the piece: "Look at Me," "Go Away," "Kick of Spring," "The Clown." Her artist friends love the painted-wood pieces, which strike most of them as direct reflections of Mrs. Parsons' own impulsive, witty, and energetic nature.

No one has yet suggested that Betty Parsons is a major artist, but her work is looked upon with respect; it is shown by the A. M. Sachs Gallery, in New York, and by the Studio Gallery, in Washington, D.C. (Mrs. Parsons is much too professional to have ever considered showing it at her own gallery), and this July she will have a show at the Benson Gallery, in Bridgehampton, Long Island. "Painting is a compulsive thing with me," she has said. "It's a way of keeping alive. There's no conflict between my work as an artist and my work as a dealer, because when I sit down to paint I have no recall. Nothing interests me except that direct contact I try to make with the canvas. A lot of artists don't go to exhibitions, because they're afraid of being influenced. A lot more shouldn't go—I could name names, but I won't. I started quite late finding my own clear path, and now nothing interferes with it."

LOOKING back over her career is not something that Mrs. Parsons is much inclined to do. She lives her several different lives at a pace that leaves little time for reflection, and she shows absolutely no sign of slowing down. During a single week last fall, for example, she flew to Syracuse on Saturday, September 28th, for the opening of a sculpture show by Ruth Vollmer, one of her artists, at the Everson Museum there; spent Sunday and Monday painting at her house in Southhold; returned to preside over the hanging and then the opening, on Tuesday afternoon, of a show of paintings by the English artist Mark Lancaster at her gallery, and entertained the artist and nine others for dinner that night at a West Side restaurant; flew to Washington on Wednesday for the opening of the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, where she was pleased to observe that the many works of art acquired by Hirshhorn from her gallery looked "happy" on the walls ("At the Guggenheim, all the pictures look as though they wish they were somewhere else. But not here"); stayed overnight in Washington with her friend Mrs. Adelyn Breeskin, formerly the director of the Baltimore Museum of Art and now a consultant on twentieth-century painting and sculpture at the National Collection of Fine Arts; and then toured the Hirshhorn all over again the next morning, before flying back to New York, where she just had time to dress for a party given by the collector Samuel I. Newhouse, Jr., in honor of Alexander Liberman's opening at the André Emmerich Gallery. (Liberman showed first at Parsons, and he and Mrs. Parsons have remained good friends.) In between these events, she had managed to sell a difficult painting by a relatively unknown artist, Edward Zutrau, for six hundred dollars, to a collector who had said he was reluctant to buy any painting that cost less than five thousand dollars; had conferred at length, in idiomatic French, with the Italian sculptor Mario Ceroli, whom she would be showing in December, and who had turned up unexpectedly in New York just when she was trying to reach him by telephone in Rome; had had dinner with her friend and customer Joel Grey, the actor, and his wife (Grey describes Mrs. Parsons as "the strongest vulnerable person I know"); had taken one of her several nieces on a tour of the art galleries in SoHo (Mrs. Parsons enjoys the lively SoHo art scene but has no intention of moving her gallery there); had paid a visit to Kenzo Okada, who was in the

hospital, and whose parting words as she sped on to her next appointment were "Betty! Control yourself!;" and had somehow found time for a considerable amount of office work, reading, and letter writing, and for her twice-weekly sessions at the Subud Center, where followers of the Indonesian sage Muhammad Subuh practice various methods of emptying the mind and calming the emotions, so that they can enter "the creative void." Mrs. Parsons has been a Subud practitioner for fifteen years, and she is convinced that it helps to keep her going. Her own mind-emptying technique is movement—a personal form of dance.

"Mies van der Rohe once said something that has stuck with me," Mrs. Parsons said recently. "I have a bad memory, but some things I don't forget. Mies said that there is a great deal of talent around but that there are only two things that really count—clarity and energy. Some people have one without the other, but both are necessary. Anyway, that's what I look for in an artist. There's a lot of work being done today that's interesting, and intelligent, and beautifully made, but it doesn't have any vitality. It has clarity without energy. I'm very much interested in the future. We're finished with the expanding world now—it's become impossible to expand any more—and so I think artists will have to do some exploring of their inner worlds. I feel that in the time of enormous change that's ahead of us we're going to depend on the artist more than ever. Businessmen never see anything but profit and loss, but the world is going into a phase where that doesn't count anymore." She paused for a few moments, and then said, "The forties and the early fifties—that was an incredible period in art. I don't think we'll see that kind of energy again for a long time. But I'm not really interested in the historical thing. I go along entirely on enthusiasm and belief in artists and faith in the creative process. Which is very *mysterious*, thank God. Once, a few years ago, I went to see Giacometti in his studio. He was making drawings, a whole series of new drawings, and they were incredibly beautiful. I said, 'How do you do it?' He said, 'It's easy. All it takes is a lifetime.'"

—Calvin Tomkins

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CITY CRIME RATE SOARS,
POLICE EXPRESS CONCERN
—*Headline in the Ottawa Citizen.*

Somebody has to show an interest.