

# Betty Parsons Taught America to Appreciate What It Once Called 'Trash': Abstract Art

By **Ken Kelley**

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Among the prized possessions in Betty Parsons' art collection is a 600-year-old Fiji Islands totem figure carved from weathered olive wood. At moments during the day she casts fond glances at the primitive sculpture, which is almost as tall as its owner. "I think it looks exactly like me, don't you?" she chuckles, "except I don't have three mouths to laugh with."

At 78, Betty Parsons, artist, gallery owner and international legend, certainly could laugh out of the side of the one mouth she does have if she chose. Thirty years ago she championed the pioneers of abstract expressionism at a time when critics and an unready public dismissed their work as "trash." With confidence in her own taste and judgment—and the courage to act on them—Parsons blazed the trail for some of the universally acknowledged giants of American modern art: Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still.

Age has not dimmed her eye or enthusiasm. She was among the first to recognize in more recent years the importance of avant-garde artists like Ellsworth Kelly, Alexander Liberman, Agnes Martin and Robert Rauschenberg. "Virtually everybody who is anybody in the art world was shown by Betty at some point or another," Liberman says. One of her discoveries, Jack Youngerman, adds: "She has introduced more important artists than any other gallery owner."

Vindication for Betty Parsons was a long time coming. "My reputation was built on hostility," she notes ruefully. "I had no friends and some very virulent enemies in the old-guard art scene when I began. They threw their heavy artillery against me. They were convinced I was perverting the public taste."

A typical reaction shortly after World War II, she remembers, was that of a top New York critic who came by the Betty Parsons Gallery in Manhattan to view a show by Barnett Newman (single stripes down giant canvases): “He walked from the elevator, took one look and started out the door again. I grabbed him and said, ‘Will you please come back, sit for five minutes and look at one picture?’ He did, and he told me, ‘Maybe you have something here.’ Of course, he didn’t say that in his review.”

Painters who were given their first one-man shows by Parsons owe her a professional debt they can never repay. “The most extraordinary thing about Betty is the rapport she establishes with her artists,” says Liberman, a trailblazer in the minimalist style. “It’s because she is an artist herself. She has such a sense of largesse—there’s nothing petty about her.”

A streak of contrariness, however, does run through Betty Parsons’ life and is apparent even in her family history. Both of her grandfathers were officers in the Civil War—one Yankee, the other Southern. “I’m so American,” Betty claims, “that I had grandfathers who actually fought a battle against each other.” (She is hazy about which battle and who won.)

Born Betty Pierson in a New York City townhouse on a site now occupied by Rockefeller Center, she was the second of three daughters of a Wall Street broker. Her mother, a New Orleans belle, felt a special affinity for the French. After the children were grown, she divorced Betty’s father and went off to live in Paris.

Betty received the best finishing-school education her father’s considerable means could provide. After her debut in 1919, she married a wealthy socialite, Schuyler Livingston Parsons. But for all her affluent background, the rebellious Betty never fit comfortably into predestined molds. Though her family was staunchly Republican, she evolved into a New Deal Democrat (“Eleanor Roosevelt was one of the great women of the world—I met her a number of times. Adlai Stevenson was one of my gods”). And while she was so skilled at tennis that she was invited to join a national team when she was 17, she turned down a subsequent chance to go on tour “because I couldn’t see myself hitting little white balls for the rest of my life.”

She was even more repelled by the life of a New York hostess. “My husband wanted me to be a typical socialite,” she says. “We never agreed on anything, so finally we decided it wasn’t going to work.” In 1922 she fled to Paris, got a divorce and began art studies at the prestigious Grande Chaumière under the master, Antoine Bourdelle. Working next to her was a Swiss student named Albert Giacometti, later to leave his own substantial mark on contemporary art.

With a generous allowance from home, she studied sculpture and painting and dallied in France for 11 years. But when the Depression devastated the family treasury, she recrossed the Atlantic and settled in California. She taught painting in Santa Barbara, selected vintages for a wine dealer (“I do know my wines”) and did portraits on commission in Hollywood. There she met Robert Benchley, Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo (with her fine cheek bones and straight hair, Betty still is occasionally mistaken for the reclusive Swede). Betty fell in love and thought briefly about remarriage but, she says, “He was an alcoholic. Then I became so involved in my own work that I lost all interest in wifery.” Still, she adds coyly, “a lot of artists fell in love with me over the years.”

One experience out West stuck permanently with her: Betty attended her first rodeo. “I saw all the movement, the noise, the color, the excitement, the passion. I thought, my God, how can you ever capture this except in an abstract sense? From that time on my paintings were abstract, and I understood why abstract artists had to be abstract. They couldn’t get the whole of anything any other way.”

Parsons returned to New York in the late 1930s and found its art scene in a creative ferment. Many French modernists, displaced by the oncoming war, had sought refuge in America. New American-born artists such as Pollock and Rothko were soon to emerge under the patronage of heiress Peggy Guggenheim. In that exciting milieu, Betty Parsons began to acquire her reputation as a dealer willing to take chances on unknown artists.

In 1946, with \$1,000 of her own savings and \$4,000 she cadged from friends, she opened a gallery. When Peggy Guggenheim went back to France, Parsons remembers, Jackson Pollock was “dumped in my lap because nobody else would risk showing him.” Because Pollock’s free-flowing style ran toward the gigantic, she became the first dealer in a half century to put serious large-canvas works on exhibition.

Financially, “It was a miracle I was able to keep my head above water,” Parsons says. “If it hadn’t been for a few enlightened collectors and devoted museum directors such as Alfred Barr at the Museum of Modern Art, I wouldn’t have survived.” Her philosophy as a dealer was of little benefit. “I’ve never pushed sales very hard,” she admits. “Most dealers love the money. I love the painting.” Her attitude posed a critical choice for her stable of impoverished artists. “She always gave the impression that there was a guardian angel hovering around to make everything all right,” recalls Robert Motherwell. “The rest of us were more realistic—we literally couldn’t pay our bills. Money was the only reason anybody ever left Betty.”

Many of her artists did desert to more commercial-minded dealers—even Pollock. Most of the partings were amicable; a few were quite bitter. Painter Lee Krasner, Pollock’s widow (he died in 1956 while driving drunk), says, “Betty refused to give me another show because she said she couldn’t look at me and not think of Pollock. She at least had the honesty to say that, but I don’t buy this great-white-goddess pedestal everybody puts her on these days.” Parsons sniffs back: “Lee thinks I’m kind of off the wall because I’m not as practical as she is.” Pollock should have stayed with her, Betty claims, “if not for financial reasons, then for creative ones. He never had a drinking problem when he was with me.”

Parsons concedes she has made mistakes: She once turned down Jasper Johns, now among the most celebrated of American artists. “Although he had great promise, I didn’t think he was ready to show,” Parsons laments. “He still kids me about it.” And she remembers she sold Jackson Pollock’s *Lavender Mist* in 1950 for the seemingly munificent sum of \$1,500. A quarter century later, after the artist’s reputation had soared, the same work was resold to the National Gallery of Art for some \$2 million. “That’s the story of my life,” laughs Betty Parsons.

Though amazingly vigorous, Parsons is hardly unaware of her years. “All my close friends are dead,” she says. “I can only think of the present or I’d be in tears all the time.” Her main base is an art-filled Manhattan apartment (she also has homes on Long Island and in the West Indies). Normally she rises at 8 a.m. for a series of strenuous exercises, followed by a light breakfast eaten while reading poetry (she occasionally writes some too). Then it’s off for a full day at her gallery, interrupted by lunch with clients and friends. Twice a week she joins a group meditation session. “Your mind becomes a vacuum and then you wait for the forces to enter—and believe me, they enter,” she explains. “I was brought up an Episcopalian, but I have always rejected organized religions.”

She has had a lifelong passion for music and the dance (Martha Graham and Paul Taylor are close friends), and Betty herself these days is creating some of the most exciting art of her life—small wooden objects (often driftwood) that she paints with bright acrylic colors. She has never exhibited her own work in her gallery (“I’d be embarrassed beyond words”), preferring to sell through another dealer. “People who collect Rauschenberg or Johns,” notes Thomas Armstrong, director of the Whitney Museum, “also have a ‘Parsons’—like a mascot—in their collections.”

Betty makes only two concessions to age: no more tennis and in bed by midnight. But she says she will never retire. “I’ll probably die in my gallery in the middle of hanging a new show.”

Parsons notes proudly that much of her extensive collection is on loan to American embassies all over the world. The Peking legation has a canvas by Parsons herself. She still travels the globe in search of new artists. “I’ve seen no giants yet, but there is a lot of talent out there. I’ve always said, look at the work, not the name. Today I sell many unknown names, and I do quite well because young people are looking for something that pleases them visually.”

Her ability to recognize talent she describes as “a gift from the gods—you can’t learn it.” Betty says she is too busy to dwell on her place in art history. “I think maybe I had something of an influence,” she acknowledges. “A very famous artist once asked me, ‘How do you do it?’ I told him I was born with a great love for the unfamiliar.”

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