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INTERVIEW WITH

Betty Parsons

— art, women and
the American Dream

19th CENTURY AMERICAN

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Maria van Oosterwijck

— renewed interest in
neglected Dutch painter

OUT OF THE

Mainstream

— surviving outside of NYC





19th c. Printmakers



Betty Parsons



Maria van Oosterwijck

OUT OF THE MAINSTREAM

Two artists' attitudes about survival outside of New York City
by Janet Heitpage 4

19th CENTURY AMERICAN PRINTMAKERS

A neglected group of women is revealed to have filled roles from colorist to Currier & Ives mainstay
by Ann-Sargent Woosterpage 6

INTERVIEW WITH BETTY PARSONS

The septuagenarian artist and dealer speaks frankly about her relationship to the art world, its women, and the abstract expressionists
by Helene Aylonpage 10

MARIA VAN OOSTERWIJCK

This 17th century Dutch flower painter was commissioned and revered by the courts of Europe, but has since been forgotten
by Rosa Lindenburgpage 16

STRANGERS WHEN WE MEET

A 'how-to' portrait book reveals societal attitudes toward women
by Lawrence Allowaypage 21

GALLERY REVIEWSpage 22

EVA HESSE

Combined review of Lucy Lippard's book and a recent retrospective exhibition
by Jill Dunbarpage 33

REPORTS

Artists Support Women's Rights Day Activities, Bridgeport Artists' Studio—The Factorypage 34

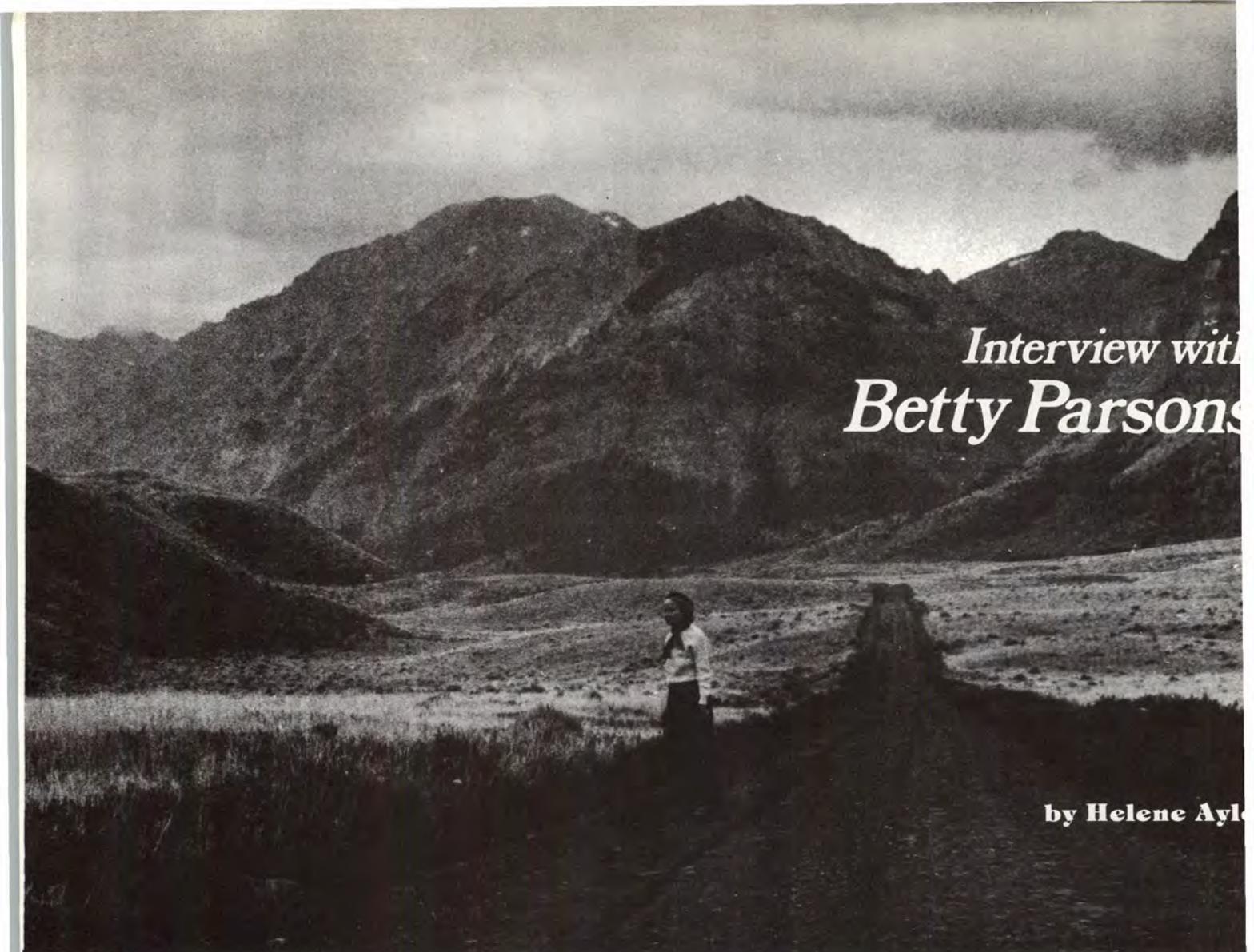
WOMAN•ART•WORLD

News items of interestpage 35

Cover:

Betty Parsons. Photo by Alexander Liberman.

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Interview with Betty Parsons

by Helene Aylon

Photo: Gwyn

AUTHOR'S NOTE —

Betty Parsons, through her involvement with abstract expressionist painters, has long been a prime mover in the arts. From her gallery—active for three decades—emerged some of the most influential painters of the '50s: Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, Hans Hofmann and Adolph Gottlieb.

Betty Parsons is a stunningly theatrical woman. Seventy-seven years old, she is strong, independent and upper-class. Her consciousness has been molded by the era she came out of. However, in the tumultuous and often tainted world of art dealership, she has been consistently ethical, and artists who have not yielded commercial returns have nonetheless retained her loyalty over the years. An artist in her own right, she has had more than a dozen solo exhibitions, the most recent in January 1977 at the Kornblee Gallery in New York.

What follows is a partial transcription of a conversation taped on January 19, 1977. It took place first at a private dinner club, where Betty is a member, and then continued to her apartment on Central Park West. It was continued briefly on her visit to California in April. Parts I and II explore Betty Parsons' connections to the art world, and to women in particular; Part III, her views toward abstract expressionism. Interestingly, she articulates the inherent link between action painting of the '50s and American expansionism; to her, action painting was energetic and masculine, inseparable from the American Dream. There's a strong correlation in her attraction to both the "heroic" aspects of these artists and to the American Frontier mystique.

PART I

"...In those days, women didn't really respect each other. I think they do respect each other now..."

Helene Aylon: I'd like to know about your contacts with women artists in the '50s. You knew Agnes Martin.

Betty Parsons: Agnes Martin I met out in New Mexico. She told me she was a painter. She was coming to New York and could she come and see me. I said, "by all means." She came to see me. She was extremely poor, no money. I bought a couple of her paintings and I said to her, "I can not take you on now, but eventually I would like to." She went back to Taos, New Mexico, and took a job as a librarian. I finally went out there and went to her studio and thought the paintings were marvelous. I said, "All right, I'll give you a show." I think she had her first show with me in 1960. I remember getting a couple of paintings sold to keep her afloat and then she went back to New Mexico. Two years later I gave her another show,

when I was at 15 East 57th Street, and that was quite a success.

HA: You became very friendly with her.

BP: Oh yes, we were always good friends. In fact I actually went on a pack trip with her. She was a fantastic outdoorswoman. She had grown up on a farm with horses and was the national swimming champion of Canada for two or three years. When she moved to New York she got a big studio down on the Bowery. And I used to go down there and actually did a lot of paintings in her studio. I wrote this to Agnes: "May the leaves of yesterday not follow you. May the birds of the future guide you. And the voice of the wind inform you and the rays of the sun embrace you."

HA: What made you write that?

BP: She was leaving. She left New York! It was a farewell poem to her.

HA: It was an act of great independence for her to move away by herself.

BP: Agnes Martin was an extremely independent woman. She took care of all her brothers and sisters. She took care of everything, and everything she did, she learned from. She learned about life through it. When she talks about happiness and joy...there is a big difference between them to her. Joy is a spiritual thing. Happiness is a worldly thing. I know what she talks about. Happiness has to do with this world and Joy has to do with what made this world...But she also had a great many hostilities. She disliked a lot of things. She was a fighter. And a thinker. And a poet. If she didn't like something, she came right out and said it.

HA: That is something I imagine you could identify with because you do the same thing. That is something I notice about women artists of the '50s. They're tough. They weren't out to please men.

BP: They weren't out to please them, but I



In her studio, surrounded by sculptures-in-progress. Photo: Gwyn Metz.

know Louise Nevelson loved men. She wasn't out to please them, but she was out to have fun with them. And I think Agnes also. Her whole life was out to enjoy whatever relationship she had.

HA: When did you connect with Louise Nevelson?

*BP: I remember Louise Nevelson's show at Grace Borgenicht's. She was very unknown. I thought her show was so exciting. And I fell in love with a piece, and I had no money, very little money. Louise said, "Cut it in half." I think the piece was \$450. And I bought it for \$200 or \$250. I'm very proud of it and it has been shown all over. I call it *Mistress of the Moon*. I admire Grace Borgenicht for finding her and showing her.*

HA: Hedda Stern was in your gallery for years.

BP: Yes, Hedda Stern. She has been with me for 34 years. A very electric but sensitive person. But I think she was brought up with the domination of the male, coming from a Rumanian family. But she managed to get away from it and she is very much on her own now, and sees through all of it. She was married to Saul Steinberg for 15 years. Saul's material came out of going to night clubs and parties, and he wouldn't go out without her. They finally parted company because she could never get enough work done.

HA: You showed Lee Krasner, too.

BP: Oh yes, I knew Lee Krasner through Jackson Pollock. She wanted to be in the gallery and I said that I don't like to have a wife and a husband in the same gallery. Pollock convinced me that it was unimportant, and there was no competition there at all. I feel that Pollock respected what she did, and of course, she thought he was great.

HA: When Pollock left, I heard that you wanted her to leave, too.

BP: No. Before Pollock left, Lee said she didn't want any more shows. By the time she wanted to come back, I was filled up again.

HA: Did you feel she was a strong woman?

BP: Oh yes, very strong. I don't think Lee was ever too much in favor of women. I don't think she ever went to any trouble to help a woman. In those days women didn't really respect each other. I think they do respect each other now.

HA: In the '50s and '60s I feel that women dealers related differently to their male and female artists. The classic story is the one about Jackson Pollock and Peggy Guggenheim. You know the story...Pollock urinated into the fireplace to put out the fire. Peggy Guggenheim was enchant-

Betty Parsons in her gallery with several of the major artists she represented in the late 1950s. From left to right: Ellsworth Kelly, Richard Pousette-Dart (?), Parsons, Ad Reinhardt, Kenzo Okada. She had written in a catalogue: "The American artist...is at the spiritual center of the world...they have the background of the American Dream."



ed and thought, "how original!", and took an interest in him. If Lee Krasner had done that, I don't think it would have been quite so fascinating.

BP: I guess so, I guess so. I never thought in terms of whether they were male or female. I didn't give a damn.

HA: These are very subconscious kinds of feelings.

BP: I always got on with the artists. A lot of them fell in love with me. Their names will be nameless. We had discussions. I made it absolutely clear what to expect from me, and we always got on.

HA: What about you? Were you an artist in those days?

BP: I have worked at painting and sculpture since 1920.

HA: Were you visible as an artist?

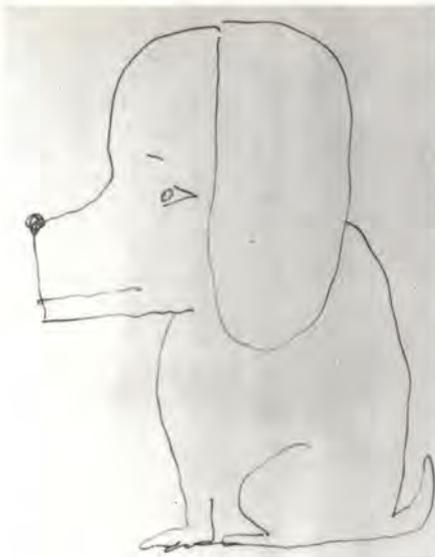
BP: Well you see, I had to make many decisions about that. I had gotten a divorce in 1921. During those years I worked right alongside Giacometti. I spent eight years working very hard. I was extremely serious about it. I wanted to be a sculptor. My greatest love was sculpture. When the crash came in 1929, I lost everything. I went to California and taught.

HA: Where?

BP: I taught privately in my own studio in Santa Barbara. To the young people there. I was glamour, glamour to them. They were dying to learn something.

HA: Did you ever want to have a child?

BP: When I started out I wanted to have 12 children, let me tell you. It would have



Saul Steinberg. Profile of Betty Parsons, 1958. 8x5 1/4". Photo: Geoffrey Clements.

been great fun—all the fighting, arguing, great fun! That was when I was in my teens. That wasn't my destiny. If it had been my destiny, it would have happened.

HA: Betty, I look at your piece that you traded with me, and it reminds me of secret places, secret dwellings. Almost child-like, like children playing with blocks and making magical things.

BP: Well I have that Irish thing in me. I have always been fascinated with what I

call the invisible presence. We all have it. Everything has it...a room has it. And that is what I am intrigued with...especially when I am working. That invisible presence. You know that big painting...the one you see when you come into the big room. When I was doing it, I was filled with that invisible presence. It was like a journey. I was riding into some strange country that didn't exist. You know the most permanent thing in this world is the invisible. You can never get away from it. You could not put an arm out this way if there was not something invisible to put it into.

PART II

"...I have had tremendous nourishment from women..."

HA: Do you have any close women friends?

BP: Oh yes, I have many close friends. But the thing with me you see, is that many of my close women friends are dead. My very close women friends are dead. I had a very close woman friend in France, Mrs. Emmanuel Bove, a sculptress, who is dead. A very close friend in England, Adge Baker, is still alive and I still get letters from her. She is in her 80s. I went over there to get a divorce. She was 10 years older than I was. I met her through friends; she took an interest in me and I was flattered. Ten years older—that was quite old then. It's nothing now! And really, I was very pleased. Very extraordinary Englishwoman. And she gave me hell all the time; she was extremely critical. She never let me do anything but the best. She had quite an influence on me to keep on my feet and not be dominated by the male. In fact, I don't think I would be alive today if I never met this Englishwoman. She was an artist. She saw so clearly, she was so wise. She saw through the male at a very early age. She had nearly always lived alone, the way that I have nearly always lived alone in my life.

You see, I had this thing about wanting to be independent. I had this friend who said she would subsidize me for two years. I thought it over very carefully, and I realized that at the end of two years I would have done a lot, but where would I be? I would have to take a job, for surely no one would buy an unknown painter.

HA: Who was this friend?

BP: Well she is dead now...Dorothy Haydell...She is dead but she was my best friend. Oh my god what a friend she was. She paid my dentist bills. She was a very rich woman that I knew long before. She married this very rich man and had a series of marriages. She was always my friend. I helped her in any way I could. She believed in me. And I believed in her.

HA: Was she in the art world?

BP: She collected. She was married to a prince. Cole Porter and Monty Wooky were her friends. She really was very interested in society, and the worldly

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whirl. I am not a person to be interested in that.

HA: *You are sort of in and out of it.*

BP: Yes that is right.

HA: *You knew Martha Graham, Marlene Dietrich, and after all, you played tennis with Greta Garbo!*

BP: Two or three times. Interesting the way I met her. I was asked on Christmas Eve by her ghost writer, Salka Fierte. She said, "Come over and we are going to dress the tree." I got there and Salka said, "go up to the attic and bring down a great big box of Christmas dressings..." So I went up there, and Greta and I stared at each other over the top of the box.

She was very beautiful. So we dressed the tree. There were candles. The Germans always have candles on their trees. I was standing at the mantelpiece, with a glass of brandy, and she was coming toward me with a candle she was going to put on the tree. I leaned forward and asked, "Which one of us burns more brightly...me with the brandy, or you with the candle?" And she got very serious and said, "You burn much brighter than I, because you burn from within, I, with the candle, am burning from without." I was fascinated.

She was very shy. Her boyfriend was Mamrovillian, the director, and he was very jealous.

She liked women very much. I married a man who was jealous of everything, too. When I got interested in a book, in a place, in a human being...I think the reason is that men feel they really haven't got you, and that makes them jealous of any close relationship.

HA: *You yourself were not necessarily male-identified.*

BP: No, you see I was always very critical of the male. Because there were so many boring males around me. They were athletic, rich and aggressive and they were insensitive. I didn't like any part of it. I thought they were all bloody bores.

HA: *And all those feelings we had for women were considered crushes.*

BP: Oh, I've had plenty of crushes on women. At school I had a crush on my teacher, a literature teacher. I was scared to death of some teachers, but I had crushes on them.

HA: *Were you shy and secretive?*

BP: I was brought up in a very New England background where you never showed to the public what you felt, especially if it wasn't according to Hoyle. I remember my mother saying to me, "Betty it doesn't matter much what you do, but never get found out." That was the philosophy that she had, which I didn't like very much but I knew what she meant. Coming from a very rigid background, the gossip goes on—they tear you to pieces...Because everybody's jealous of anybody getting any of the happiness that they are not getting. So if I had a boyfriend or if I had a girlfriend and got too close, never let the world know it. Unless you get married and all that.

continued on following page

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Gerrit Henry, 1976, o/c, 56x54".



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HA: But it's a pleasure to be honest.
BP: But take truth: I agree with what the Greeks say, "Truth is too sacred to tell."
HA: You have to tell it to yourself first.
BP: I have a dialogue continually with myself about the truth but I don't tell it to everybody.
HA: Cautiousness can be paralyzing.
BP: It's a form of self-preservation.
HA: Now with feminism, we have our sisters to talk to.
BP: I think in the past, women have been enemies to each other. In the 100% female, which I can't stand or understand, every other woman is her enemy, because other women may get in the way of getting her man. And in the 100% male, he is out to seduce every woman he can, without any sense of responsibility about the rest of it. That's the dog, I call it. The dog and the bitch. And I can't stand the dog and the bitch...In my childhood, I knew there was something about them that made me uncomfortable. The balanced human being has both male and female...If you are born a female you predominate in the sense that you are the one who has to carry the race. Male is the will power. Male has the will to say I will do this, I will do that.

HA: But you have the will.

BP: Yes...I have lots of the male in me. (You see, there are a lot of men who have tremendous feeling...a rounded person will have both.) I think the world now is becoming androgyn, as the Greeks called it. You see people walking the streets today and it is very hard to tell which is the male and which is the female.

HA: Clear cut lines are rigid.

BP: I think there are three things we have no control over. We have no control over our birth, we have no control over our death, and if we are sincere, we have no control over our feelings.

I have got to read you something if you would like. Let me try and find it... "Love is a fire burning in one's breast. It needs no object. Sometimes it is the nourishment of longing of what one never met before. You might meet it anywhere, the Master said, 'feed my sheep,' t'was a command." In other words, everywhere there is nourishment, if we know how to take it. It's a terrific poem. Haven't seen this woman for years. I just suddenly got this. She sent me this poem, "...I wrote this poem and I thought of you, so I'm sending it to you..." Oh, I've had tremendous nourishment from women. Because they like me. Women like me, you know.

HA: You don't play games. You could love a woman, and they sense that.

BP: Yes, they know it, they know it...

PART III

"...Well, I tried to be free.
In Europe, they weren't even
struggling to be..."

HA: I think at the very beginning you saw

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some of your artists as the legends they were to become; you recognized this quality of rugged individualism.

BP: The individual has always interested me. I can't stand packs.

HA: *The individual man or woman?*

BP: Let me see how I can phrase this...If I have to be in the company of either men or women, I'd rather be in the company of men. But I'd prefer a woman who was an individual.

HA: *And when you say you can't stand packs...*

BP: The general public is dead. All they care about is how they're going to pay their rent and what they'll put in their stomachs. I have always been interested in the creative approach to life. It is regenerating for me. And what I call the higher dimensions. The interpretation of God has failed. You know, Christ was the greatest artist the world ever bred, because he understood what mankind was all about. Mankind is not here for stuffing stomachs and fornicating.

HA: *You do see artists as Godlike. And you wrote about some of your artists with a kind of reverence.*

BP: It's what I call The Unknown Quantity that interests me. You read that thing that I wrote about Ad Reinhardt, didn't you? "...who put the light into the shadows. And crossed the horizon numerous times." You know, he was a great traveler, fantastic traveler, he had a thousand slides from all over the world. "...and death, with many intricate lines who turned the day into night, in his struggle with dark and light." Which are his pictures. Fantastic pictures. God! Now, Tony Smith is another, I wrote a thing to Tony. "...The sky looked down and all around the earth was under something grand; it was not rocks, it was not sand, it was the scale upon the land. It reached the summit of the light, and tossed the day upon the night."

HA: *Whew! There's a feeling of something very huge. It's like the quote from your interview in the New Yorker magazine. Can I read it? You're describing your initial reaction to the abstract expressionists: "It was the expanding world they were after. 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 makes me think of an eagle or a stallion. And Tony Smith—his sculpture holds down the horizon..." (God, Betty these are potent images. Not many dealers write like this about their artists...)*

Then you compare American painting to European painting. "I realized they were saying something no European could say...Europe is a walled city—at least, it always seemed that way to me. Pollock released the historical imagination of this country. I've always thought the West was

continued on page 20

"Studio Floor Still Life #12," 1977, o/c, 46x56"



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into the Guild as a master. Thus Maria would also have had to become a member of the guild, even though women were not as a rule accepted in their own right. (30) An exception, however, was often made for widows.

There is no evidence to show that Maria van Oosterwijk was a member of a St. Lucas Guild, although this is further hindered by the fact that the archives of the Guilds in Delft and Amsterdam have only been partially preserved. The only surviving membership list of the Amsterdam Guild dates from March 1688. This list does in fact include the names of women, even of non-widows, but not that of Maria van Oosterwijk. (31)

The Amsterdam Guild was very flexible in enforcing the prerequisites for membership and was the model for other guilds such as the one in Delft. (32) In the extant Delft book of masters (not from Maria's era) women were also included and there is no reason to assume they were widows. (33)

The Haarlem Guild was much stricter than the Amsterdam-modeled Guild of St. Lucas. Yet the painter Judith Leyster and the flower painter Rachel Ruysch both were accepted into the Guild on their own merit (34) though in Leyster's case, as in others, her marriage to another painter might have helped.

However, in the middle of the 17th century, the guilds gradually lost their monopolistic position. The municipal government of Amsterdam felt less and less sympathy with guild coercion and the surreptitious free trade in art thrived. In practice the Amsterdam Guild was powerless to control the thriving art trade outside of the St. Lucas Guild, in spite of a 1630 ordinance which stated that a senior member of the guild must be present at every purchase of a painting. (35)

Probably it was not essential for Maria van Oosterwijk to have become a guild member, as it would have greatly restricted her. Perhaps, as a woman, it was even easier to avoid coercion by the Guild. We know that she used intermediaries, usually Amsterdam merchants, (36) in the sale of her works. It seems unlikely that she requested the permission of the guild to do so. In the previously mentioned transactions no witness from the guild is ever mentioned.

*

Nostalgia for the Dutch Golden Age occurred in the newly formed Kingdom of the Netherlands in the 19th century. Maria van Oosterwijk's name in the meantime had slipped into obscurity. She again became a heroine during this time via the novel bearing her name as title, written by one of the few important Dutch women novelists of the period, Anna Geertruida Bosboom-Toussaint.

Bosboom-Toussaint uses Houbraken's data as a starting point for the novella *Maria van Oosterwijk*,* (37) which was

*Note: In the novel Maria's name is spelled differently.

published in 1862, as well as for her later book *Willem van Aelst, The Last Act of a Stormy Life*.

In the hands of Bosboom-Toussaint, the romance between the two painters develops into a bitter struggle centering on van Oosterwijk's fight to retain her identity. Bosboom-Toussaint's own romance with another rakish genius is certainly projected in the novel story.

For the author as for her readers at the time, Maria van Oosterwijk is "truly an emancipated woman" who, with vocation and energy, is able to master herself so as to devote her life to art, while yet retaining her feminine inclination toward sacrifice.

Thus in the novel, Maria pledges her faith to Willem van Aelst with the words: "I could hate you because you have succeeded in making me unlike myself." (38) Thanks to Bosboom-Toussaint, Maria van Oosterwijk has rightly entered the annals of the struggle for the emancipation of women.

FOOTNOTES

1. Ann Sutherland Harris, Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists: 1550-1950*, New York, 1976; at the same time catalogue for the exhibition of the same name at the Los Angeles County Museum Dec. 21, 1976-March 13, 1977. This excellent thorough overview on women artists contains more information about women still-life painters in Holland, p.35, and on Maria van Oosterwijk, pp.145-146.
2. Peter Mitchell, *European Flower Painters*, London, 1973, p.25. Basic work about the subject of flower painting in general.
3. C. Hofstede de Groot, *Quellenstudien zur holländischen Kunstgeschichte: Arnold Houbraken und seine "Groote Schouburgh" kritisch beleuchtet*, Den Haag, 1893. Hofstede corrects Houbraken on van Oosterwijk's birthdate to August 20, p.425. However, this is in contrast with the birthday poem, see note 25.
4. C. Spoor, *Kroniek van Nootdorp*, jubileum edition, copy 77, Nootdorp, 1966, p.98. Spoor, the recent vicar of Nootdorp, has done extensive research in church and municipal archives.
5. This must have been later in her life, since she is reported to live with her maid alone. See note 9.
6. Houbraken, II, p.216. Spoor p.98 finds evidence of these facts, though the location is slightly different.
7. See note 2.
8. U. Thieme, F. Becker, *Allgemeines Lexikon der bildenden Künstler* tome XXVI, Leipzig, 1969, p.25.
9. A. von Wurzbach, *Niederländischer Künstler-Lexikon* Leipzig, 1910, p.256.
10. See note 9.
11. See note 8. Updated list of works in Harris & Nochlin, p.145. See note 1.
12. Houbraken II, p.217.
13. See note 2. Houbraken's information is accepted.
14. Ralph Warner, *Dutch and Flemish fruit and flowerpainters of the XVII and XVIII th centuries*, London, 1928, pp.162-163.
15. See note 9.
16. Houbraken I, pp. 228, 229.
17. Rosenberg, p.338.
18. Mitchell, p.190. Not able to verify.
19. Rosenberg, p.338.
20. Harris & Nochlin, see note 1, catalogue #28, p.146, colorplate p.76.
21. Catalogue of the Koninklijk (Royal Painting Collection) Kabinet van Schilderijen, Mauritshuis, Den Haag, 1935, #468.
22. Mitchell, p.13, 23.

- Harris & Nochlin, p.146.
23. See note 22, Rosenberg, p.338.
24. Quoted from Spoor, p.100.
25. Quoted from Spoor, p.102. His source is C. Huygens' *Rijmwerken* (poems), Amsterdam, 1714, pp.425, 426.
26. B.J.A. Renckens, *Een portret van de schilderes Maria van Oosterwijk en de dichter Dirk Scheite*, in *Oud-Holland*, jrg.LXXIV, 1959, pp.236-239. Illustration of Lairesse's (?) painting, p.238.
27. Vaillant's portrait is illustrated in *Oud-Holland*, jrg.LXXIII, 1958, p.244.
28. Ileen Montijn, *Schilderkunst en samenleving in de zeventiende eeuw*, in *Spiegel Historiae*, jrg.10, #4, April 1975, pp.220-229, especially pp.221-223. About social-economic structure.
29. G.J. Hoogewerff, *De geschiedenis van de St. Lucas-gilden in Nederland*, Amsterdam, 1947, pp.92, 93. Main source about St. Lucas Guilds and their history in the Netherlands.
30. Hoogewerff, p.85, illustration 6.
31. Hoogewerff, p.91, 96, 101, 102.
32. I.H. van Eeghen, *De Gilden, Theorie en Praktijk*, Bussum, 1974, p.24.
33. Fr.D.O. Obreen, *Archief voor Nederlandsche Kunstgeschiedenis*, tome I, Rotterdam, 1877, 1878. Pp.1-25 contains remaining name list of Amsterdam guild members.
34. Hoogewerff, p.59.
35. St. Lucas ordinances 1790 and St. Lucas charter 1566-1611 fol. 305-310 vs. From the Municipal Archives of Delft.
36. Interviews Archivists July 1975 in Delft (Mr. van Leeuwen) and in Amsterdam (Mrs. van Eeghen).
37. Hoogewerff, p.121.
38. Masterbooks Delft St. Lucas Guild, 1679-1715, fol.18 vs, 19 vs, 20. Preserved in the main library of the Netherlands, the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Den Haag.
39. Eleanor Tufts, *Our hidden heritage*, New York, 1973, pp.72, 100.
40. See note 27.
41. See note 9.
42. A.L.G. Bosboom-Toussaint, *Maria van Oosterwijk* Rotterdam, 1862.
43. J.M.C. Bouvy, *Idee en werkwijze van mevrouw Bosboom-Toussaint*, Rotterdam, 1935, p.118, 119, 124.

BETTY PARSONS *continued from page 15*

an important factor in the art of the '40s and '50s here. Pollock came from Wyoming, Rothko in Oregon—all those enormous spaces. Still grew up in North Dakota. They were all trying to convey the expanding world." You didn't say what you meant by the 'expanding world.'

BP: Yes, I wrote that in my catalogue. Did you see this? "America is at the crossroads of a spiritual center. The American artist therefore is at the spiritual center of the world. The problem of being an American is unimportant. They could paint their paintings anywhere. It is important that they have the background of the American Dream."

HA: *I could never be that patriotic. But then, you wrote that in the '40s. Expansionism is no longer an acceptable political concept.*

BP: But the American Dream is a dream of freedom.

HA: *I guess you still have that patriotism. You came here, your grandfather was in New York, living on what is now Rockefeller Plaza.*

BP: Yes that's right. You see the American Dream did not exist in Europe, and remember, I had been in Europe 11 years. The Italians, the English, the Middle East, they were all dominated by politics. By the male. There was no freedom, and whatever the morals were, the laws were

Strangers When We Meet

by Lawrence Alloway

Joe Singer. *Painting Women's Portraits*. 29 color, 100 b/w illus. 152 pp. Watson-Guptill. \$16.95

For once I am writing about a book in which all the artists are unknown to me. It feels like that James Cagney film *Come Fill The Cup* which opens with him sitting down at his desk in the city room of a newspaper and typing, close-up: "all the dead were strangers." I recognize some of the artists that Joe Singer cites as comparisons—Leonardo, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Velasquez and Van Gogh, but all the others, though called "prominent" in the introduction, are strangers. In addition, most of the portraits are of strangers, except for an artist's wife and daughter or two.

The first contact of this kind of artist and sitter begins with the commission to paint the picture. Not for these artists the portraits that signal love, affection, familiarity, respect, admiration, or liking, or any of the cadences of proximity. No, this book is about how to paint strangers for money. You should "put all clocks out of sight" and in conversation "avoid politics, religion, gossip, and ethnic jokes." Even gossip? And three-quarter views of the head are virtually obligatory as full face depiction flattens. You should avoid the notation of idiosyncratic individuality and stress the socially continuous aspect of the unknown sitter before you.

Since the mid-19th century innovative and perceptive portraiture has rested on the personal relationship of artist and sitter. This is as true of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood as it is of the Impressionists: Millais painted Ruskin, Monet painted Mme. Monet. Commissioned portraits, or the depiction of strangers, have come to

occupy a secondary role in art history. Singer is concerned not only with formal professional portraiture (this is predomi-



Claude Oscar Monet, *La Capeline Rouge—Madame Monet*, ca. 1870. Oil on canvas, 39½x31½". The Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna Jr. Collection. "Since the mid-19th century innovative and perceptive portraiture has rested on the personal relationship of artist and sitter."

nantly male and belongs in colleges and board rooms) but with informal professional portraits. These are images of wife and mother (often the same person) and adolescent daughter, designed to hang in the homes occupied by the sitters. Singer discusses ways to handle strangers, but not with much candor. He projects a sensible, hard-nosed attitude, but gives no information on how to find a painter if you want your portrait done and does not mention how much the transaction is likely to cost or in what form payment is made. I

suppose Portraits Inc., mentioned in the acknowledgments, would be the best way to go about it.

Painting Women's Portraits taken as a typology, makes sense. The individual identity of sitters is purposefully blurred, but the social function of the paintings are clear. The sitters have a certain exchangeability. For instance, mothers and daughters are not keenly separated: are we looking at a youthful mother or at a daughter ready to take her mother's role in society? The general wardrobe of shirt dresses, woolen coats, and mid-town New York hair styles, slurs generational variation. This is not a mistake on the part of these painters, but their purpose: it implies the existence of a league of good women, persistent from generation to generation, the external sign of which is durable, long-term style. The effect is like Hollywood movies of the '40s and '50s in which fashions, Lana Turner's, say, were generalized so that movies could be re-issued without dating too fast. Similarly the dating of the portraits is rather indeterminate. Out of 129 reproductions, I counted one from the '30s, two from the '50s, four from the '60s, and 14 from the '70s (eight of them, done for the book, from last year). This leaves 108 undated pictures which shows Singer's detachment from the usual procedures of art history.

The social homogeneity of the sitters is marked and it is true that many husbands want to be married to a woman who is like other women of the same class, age, education, and race. If a husband or father is paying for such a portrait he would want the statistical resemblances to be present no less than traces of specific identity. These are women who can raise children, run the house, give a party; they can earn executive approval (good for husband's career) while maintaining the infra-structure of domesticity. The roles that these images of women imply are company wife, hostess, and as mentioned above, mother-daughter. As a sociological document concerning the self-images of one group of women in society the book is a gold-mine.

still 200, or 500 years old.

HA: *But is the Dream real?*

BP: The American Dream was the dream of freedom to do as you please, to do as you risk. Each person must be free.

HA: *But you were in a Victorian, imperial world. So you were not free.*

HA: Well, I tried to be free. In Europe they weren't even struggling to be. They aren't even struggling now to me.

The Italian woman is still actually dominated by the male. The English are a little more independent, but not much. Go over there and you'll see it, right today.

I think if I were running this world, I

would have the United States as an international country. I wouldn't have it just the United States. New York is to me the international capital of the world, I don't care what you call it. You walk down Broadway, and you hear every language spoken. And in New York, there should be a University which would teach people about the problems of the world.

HA: *Artists are increasingly recognizing themselves as political beings, in a larger world. They don't want to just be locked up in their studios in the middle of New York City.*

BP: I think politics is dangerous to the

arts. I think everyone should be conscious of politics, because I want to know where in the hell my tax money is going. And if I don't approve of it, I'm going to fight it. It goes to corruption.

HA: *Getting back to politics and art. We're creatures of the world right now, and we communicate feelings about the world through the work. It is unavoidable.*

BP: We know so little. The purpose of life is, as dear old Shakespeare said, "I come hence and go forth—ripeness is all."

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