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Artist With an Eye For Others' Work

By PHYLLIS BRAFF FEB. 28, 1999

A FRIEND to many, and admired for her elegance, loyalty and tact, Betty Parsons has long had a niche in history as the art dealer behind such notable figures as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still and Barnett Newman. Now, she is the focus not only of an exhibition on her life, her work and her artists, but also of an all-day symposium.

The symposium, "Betty Parsons: Artist and Dealer," at the Heckscher tomorrow starting at 10 A.M. (information: 351-3250), features specialists in American art discussing issues like the artist as art dealer, the plight of the female artist in the Abstract Expressionist era, and the interrelationships between the Parsons artists.

A part-time Southold resident who died in 1982, Parsons had ties to the Island that evoked history in another sense, too. Her ancestors included the Rev. Abraham Pierson, who had arrived in Southampton in 1640 to serve as the village's first minister.

"She probably chose Southold rather than Southampton, where she had many ties, to be able to have a refuge and devote herself to painting, which she could only do on weekends," said Anne Cohen DePietro, curator of the exhibition, "Shaping a Generation: The Art and Artists of Betty Parsons," on view through April 18 at the Heckscher Museum in Huntington.

Parsons's life was divided into fascinating chapters, with her feeling for art as a strong unifying thread. Born in 1900 into the Piersons, a New York City family of prestige and wealth, she had the education and finishing-school training that was considered proper for young ladies of her status, and at 20 she married Schuyler Parsons, a man from the same social circle. They divorced in Paris three years later, but she remained there for 11 years, becoming part of that city's famous group of expatriate writers and artists who flourished in the 1920's. When the Depression depleted the family fortune, she returned to the United States in 1933.

During a visit to the famous Armory Show as a schoolgirl in 1913, Parsons had been impressed with the excitement, the originality and the range of invention. She soon began to study sculpture, overcoming her family's objections only with great difficulty. Her studies continued in Paris, and her long list of solo exhibitions of painting and sculpture begins in the mid-30's.

Although she tried to survive as an artist after she returned from Europe, living first in California and then in New York, she needed regular employment. That opportunity came when the Midtown Galleries, where she had been exhibiting, offered her a position as a sales assistant. In 1940, the Wakefield Bookshop asked her to manage its art gallery. By 1944 she was managing the modern section of the Mortimer Brandt Gallery, and when Brandt moved to England two years later, she opened her own gallery in that space at the urging of her artists. With a keen eye, she had been discovering and exhibiting the work of artists she felt had merit, giving many their first shows.

When Peggy Guggenheim closed her Art of This Century gallery and returned to Europe in 1947, her artists, including Pollock and Rothko, were eager to be part of the Betty Parsons Gallery. This, then, became the place where Pollock's great achievements from 1947 through 1951 were introduced, including the large "Autumn Rhythm," "Lavender Mist" and "One," all shown in the recent Pollock retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan. Important phases in the development of many other participants in the the New York School were also first shown there.

"She always paid particular attention to those who were enlarging horizons," said Hedda Sterne, who had her first one-woman exhibition at the Wakefield space

and remained a lifelong friend of Parsons. "Betty had the correct instincts, but there was also something spontaneous and pure about her. Even though she became a success, she never aimed for success. It was destiny. She had the mentality of an artist and was somewhat embarrassed to be 'in trade.' "

Gwen Metz, a close friend and former gallery staff member, added: "It is important to not overlook her focus, which was the new, the creative, the unknown. Betty was interested in the creative note, and not in fame." Ms. Metz worries that the gallery will be remembered just for the eventual celebrity of some of the roster.

Parsons kept her own art separate from the gallery operations. Her painting style changed in 1947, turning from small landscapes and portraits into a bold, subjective abstraction that represented a response to the stimuli of her surroundings. Most often this was her North Fork cliff site on the water's edge, but sometimes the pieces reflect her travels to the Caribbean and abroad. Always a strong colorist, she became even more so.

At one point, she began to collect scraps of carpenter's fragments and other wood debris found along the shoreline and started a series of painted assemblages. Two of the museum's galleries are devoted to the Parsons art. "Our aim was to bring out the whimsy and remarkable energy," Ms. DePietro said.

A third gallery features a sampling of the artists represented in Parsons's own collection, which was dispersed after her death.

"Much of the collection was based on gifts," Ms. Metz said. "Artists wanted Betty to have a piece; Betty admired the work, and I think they wanted to be in her collection. She bought work as well, of course, and often traded with artists."

If it was not possible to borrow a piece that originally belonged to Parsons for the Heckscher show, the substitute is a work that corresponds to the period when the artist was exhibiting with her. Highlights include examples by Pollock, Rothko, Paul Feeley, Phillip Guston, Ellsworth Kelly, Kenzo Okada, Richard Pousette-Dart, Ad Reinhardt, Theodoros Stamos, Saul Steinberg and Richard Tuttle.

In a sense, Parsons is still shaping a generation, for her assets established a foundation that gives grants to organizations dedicated to assisting emerging artists. "Her will made her enthusiasms clear," said Christopher Schwabacher, director of the New York-based Betty Parsons Foundation. "She wanted to continue to help artists."

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