

Artist View



COURTESY GWYN METZ. COURTESY ALISON JACQUES AND ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK © THE BETTY PARSONS FOUNDATION; PHOTO: MICHAEL BRZEZINSKI
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Inside the mind of Betty Parsons

Betty Parsons blazed a trail through the New York art world

She managed to be that rare thing: an art dealer whose reputation rivalled those of the painters whose work she sold. Best known for her eponymous New York gallery, which she opened in 1946 after inheriting most of the Venice-bound Peggy Guggenheim's black book of artists, Parsons represented, as she called them, the 'four horsemen' of Abstract Expressionism: Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still. But she was little driven by profits: 'I never made money because I saw things too far in advance,' she once remarked.

Her exhibitions were the talk of the town

Parsons was an indomitable presence in the postwar avant-garde scene in the city, and perhaps did more than any other dealer to secure a buoyant market for abstraction in the US. 'It was the beginning of a great moment in American art that started there at Betty Parsons's,' remembered the legendary dealer Leo Castelli. 'For the first time a great original art movement took place in America.' Just how influential these shows were is hard to quantify. 'Betty and her gallery helped construct the centre of the art world,' artist Helen Frankenthaler Hon RA recalled.

She was also a respected artist in her own right

Parsons pursued her own artistic practice throughout her life. Aged 13, she decided on a career as an artist after visiting the fabled Armory Show in 1913, which introduced America to the work of Post-Impressionist artists and their successors. In 1927, she had her first one-person show in Paris, where she was living as an expatriate, studying alongside Alberto Giacometti (he 'was in the same class, but we were both so shy we hardly spoke'), and falling in with the bohemian scene that included Alexander Calder, Man Ray, Max Jacob, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. After she returned to New York in 1936, she continued making work. She vigorously painted whenever she could, whether in the bedroom-studio of her East 57th Street apartment, or living-room-studio of her country house on Long Island. While

This page, right:
Summer Fire, 1959,
by Betty Parsons

Opposite page:
Parsons, photographed by
Gwyn Metz (with Metz's
dog, Monday)



Parsons's works were recognised with a solo retrospective at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 1968, her reputation as an artist has since been relatively overlooked. This autumn, the De La Warr Pavilion in East Sussex stages the first large-scale exhibition of her art in Europe since her death in 1982.

A rodeo led to a revelatory experience

In 1947, Parsons visited New Mexico and met with Agnes Martin (who would later exhibit with her at her gallery). Parsons recalled a transformational moment from that trip: 'One day I was taken to a rodeo and there was a fantastic amount of colour and action and I said to myself how could I ever convey such excitement like this and I went home and I did it with my first abstract picture without the horses, without the tents, just a feeling of the colour and the action.' Parsons continued to paint abstractions for the rest of her life (*Summer Fire*, 1959; above).

Parsons was a master observer of landscape and detail

Many of her polychromatic abstractions drew inspiration from the sun-drenched coastlines of the Caribbean and the seasonal rhythms of Long Island, all rendered with Fauve-esque joy. Her early works, from the late-1930s to the mid-50s, are lyrical and bathed in colour. Some works respond to lush landscapes, with titles like *Old Fort - Nassau* (1939), *Bahamas* (1950) and *St Simon* (1952). This eye for detail would endure, even as her work moved into abstraction. 'A geometric zig-zag would be

snatched of a house we glimpsed; smudges of brown were suggested by a hillside; blue tatters would record a moment's weather,' the critic Lawrence Alloway remembered of Parsons's process, observed on a trip to Vermont in 1958: '[as] the diverse marks joined on the paper they would be, not descriptive of any one scene, but evocative of place, light, weather.'

She believed that painting should take a stand

In her art dealing and her passion for painting, Parsons was uncompromising. 'Art,' she wrote in a sketchbook from 1949, 'has to take an absolute position.' She emerged as a champion of a generation of artists when the status and ambition of American art was yet to be defined. Her dovetailing careers as dealer and artist demonstrated a commitment to painting that was unafraid to make the case for its importance in the world. Of the painters in her stable, she wrote a reflection that could just as easily have applied to her own work: 'These artists are establishing a relationship with the world through their own experience, and I have made a place where their expression can exist. That the strength of this liberation is so important, so vital, in a world where we see freedom being submerged all around us, is adequate compensation for my commitment.'

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● **Betty Parsons De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, 4 Oct to 18 Jan 2026**