



SHAPING ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM:

BETTY PARSONS AND HER CIRCLE

Follow this self-guided art walk through the museum to learn about women who shaped the art world at mid-century. Central to the story is Betty Parsons (1900–1982) who became one of the most influential art dealers of the twentieth century. Parsons helped steer modern art in America through her support of emerging, avant-garde talent. In her New York City gallery, she offered many women artists their first exhibitions, helping them achieve critical recognition in the male-dominated art world at the time.

This walk is presented in conjunction with the exhibition Dusti Bongé: Mississippi Modernism, on view in the Avery Building. The show explores the life and work of Mississippi's first modernist painter and the significance of her friendship with Betty Parsons.



Crediting This is one in a series of American art exhibitions created through a multi-year, multi-institutional partnership formed by the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art as part of the Art Bridges Cohort Program.

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AVERY BUILDING — 2ND FLOOR

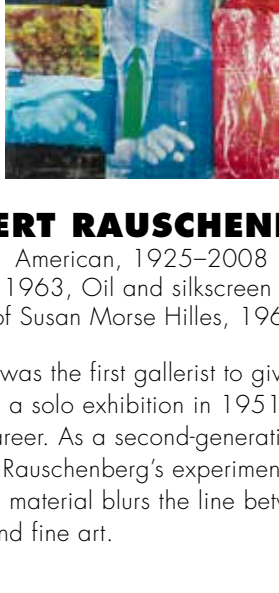
Throughout her career, Betty Parsons represented a variety of artists in both solo and group exhibitions. She rotated exhibitions frequently, to reflect the ever-changing spirit of modern art. Thanks to her keen eye for talent, her gallery ran for thirty-six years and became a celebrated place where many of the 20th century's greatest American artists got their start.



GRACE HARTIGAN

American, 1922–2008
Rappacinni's Daughter, 1955,
Oil on canvas
Gift from Howard and Jean Lipman
Foundation, Inc., 1965.390

Hartigan was one of the "Ninth Street women" a reference to a group of artists living and working in New York City's Greenwich Village neighborhood. She made a distinct effort to assimilate into the bohemian culture of the time; she loved literature and theory, which is reflected in her work.



GRACE HARTIGAN

American, 1922–2008
Untitled, 1961, Paint on paper
Gift of Samuel J. Wagstaff Jr., 1982.72

Hartigan's use of collage was likely influenced by her friend Lee Krasner, whose work is on view on the first floor. Here, you see that Hartigan ripped up a composition on paper and assembled it into a new, reimagined work.

AVERY BUILDING — 1ST FLOOR

DOROTHEA TANNING

American, 1910–2012
Beautiful Girl, 1945
Oil on linen mounted on masonite panel
2013.24.1

Prior to Betty Parsons, the prevailing art dealer was Peggy Guggenheim, who was pioneering for showing the work of many women artists. Tanning was included in Peggy Guggenheim's groundbreaking exhibition 31 Women, in 1943.

Tanning's compositions were often highly personal in nature with allusions to dreams and reality. The combination of text and imagery, as seen, results in a strange world often described as surreal. In Tanning's words, her paintings were 'unknown but knowable states.

GOODWIN BUILDING — 1ST FLOOR

Throughout her career, Betty Parsons represented a variety of artists in both solo and group exhibitions. She rotated exhibitions rapidly, always shifting to reflect the ever-changing and new spirit of the art world. Thanks to her keen eye for talent, the Betty Parsons Gallery ran for thirty-six years and became a celebrated place where many of the 20th century's greatest American artists got their start.

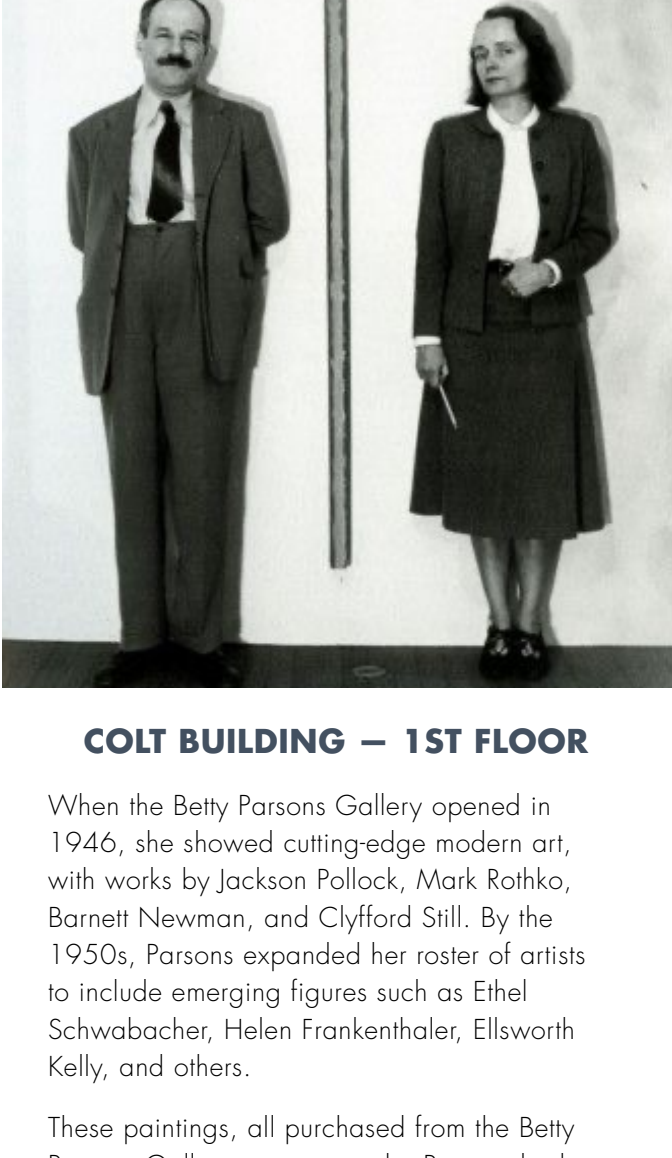
ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

American, 1925–2008
Retroactive I, 1963, Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas
Gift of Susan Morse Hilles, 1964.30

Betty Parsons was the first gallerist to give Robert Rauschenberg a solo exhibition in 1951, quite early in his career. As a second-generation Abstract Expressionist, Rauschenberg's experimental use of repurposed material blurs the line between commercial and fine art.

SHAPING ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM:

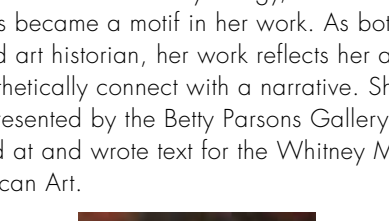
BETTY PARSONS AND HER CIRCLE



COLT BUILDING — 1ST FLOOR

When the Betty Parsons Gallery opened in 1946, she showed cutting-edge modern art, with works by Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Clyfford Still. By the 1950s, Parsons expanded her roster of artists to include emerging figures such as Ethel Schwabacher, Helen Frankenthaler, Ellsworth Kelly, and others.

These paintings, all purchased from the Betty Parsons Gallery, represent who Parsons had referred to as her “four horsemen,” meaning that they were the budding “giants” of the Abstract Expressionist art movement. While her legacy is closely tied to showing their work, when the artists asked her to represent them exclusively in 1951, she said, “Sorry, I have to find my own lights—no.”



ETHEL SCHWABACHER

(American, 1903–1984)

Antigone, Oil on canvas

Gift of the Betty Parsons Foundation, 1985.148

Schwabacher identified strongly with the stories and characters in Greek mythology, and the tragedies became a motif in her work. As both an artist and art historian, her work reflects her ability to empathetically connect with a narrative. She was represented by the Betty Parsons Gallery and exhibited at and wrote text for the Whitney Museum of American Art.



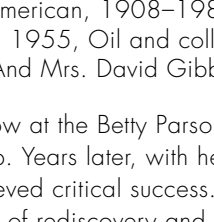
HEDDA STERNE

American, born Romania, 1916–2011)

New York No. 1, 1957, Oil and spray paint on canvas

Gift of Susan Morse Hilles, 1959.88

Sterne and Betty Parsons were close friends throughout their careers. When Betty established the Parsons Gallery, Sterne offered her financial support. They two remained friends even after many other first generation AbEx peers sought representation by other art dealers.



HELEN FRANKENTHALER

(American, 1928–2011)

Sea Picture with Black, 1959, Oil on canvas

Gift of Susan Morse Hilles, 1961.7



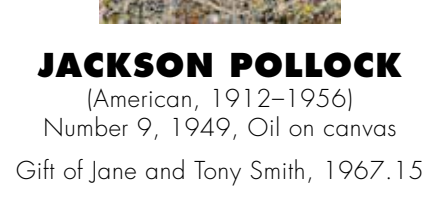
LEE KRASNER

American, 1908–1984

Broken Gray, 1955, Oil and collage on panel

Gift of Mr. And Mrs. David Gibbs, 1975.88

Krasner’s first show at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1951 was a flop. Years later, with her collages such as this, she achieved critical success. As part of Krasner’s journey of rediscovery and self-examination, she tore up earlier works and assembled them into new, energetic compositions with additional painted elements.



JACKSON POLLOCK

American, 1912–1956

Number 8, 1952, Oil on canvas

The Philip L. Goodwin Collection,

Gift of James L. Goodwin, Henry Sage Goodwin, and Richmond L. Brown, 1958.223

Pollock created spontaneous, energetic compositions that can be understood as intimate depictions of his consciousness. He was one of the major figures of the Abstract Expressionist movement and showed with Parsons. By 1952, he shifted to another dealer, Sidney Janis.



JACKSON POLLOCK

(American, 1912–1956)

Number 9, 1949, Oil on canvas

Gift of Jane and Tony Smith, 1967.15



BARNETT NEWMAN

American, 1905–1970

Onement II, 1948, Oil on canvas

Gift of Jane and Tony Smith, 1967.14



MARK ROTHKO

American, born Latvia, 1903–1970

No. 19, 1949, Oil on canvas

Gift of Tony Smith, 1967.16

CLYFFORD STILL

American, 1904–1980

Number 5, 1951, Oil on canvas

Gift of Tony Smith, 1967.18