

Essay
Modern Women Masters: 1900-1950
October 14 – November 18, 2022

Introduction

Jim and I look forward to sharing with you the prodigious talent of seventeen historic female artists of outstanding ability and courage who are now nationally and/or internationally recognized.

The women included in this exhibition are: Berenice Abbott (1898-1991), Ruth Bernhard (1905-2006), Margaret Bourke-White (1905-2005), Imogen Cunningham (1883-1976), Laura Gilpin (1891-1979), Edna Hopkins (1872-1937), Lotte Jacobe (1896-1990), Gene Kloss (1903-1996), Dorothea Lange (1895-1965), Alma Lavenson (1897-1989), Blanche Lazzell (1878-1956), Ethel Mars (1876-1959), Jane Peterson (1876-1965), Alice Schille (1869-1955), Maud Hunt Squire (1873-1955), Grace Martin Taylor (1903-1995), and Marion Post Wolcott (1910-1990).

They worked in a plethora of styles, subjects, media and with extraordinary sensitivity and perseverance under the broad rubric of Modernism from 1900 until 1950. This term encompasses many subsets of styles that reflect the rapid changes in technology and culture throughout the United States. This art was created at a time when technological changes were occurring at an exponential rate relative to the nineteenth century.

The wider scale access to electric utilities, automobiles, fast trains, central heating, refrigerators, movies, and other forms of mass entertainment such as sporting events was changing many people's lives. This period also references the major socio-political changes including the very important success of the women's suffrage movement in 1922. Also, women began to have greater freedom of personal expression, increased presence in the work force and dynamic access to fast paced urban living. The exciting developments in assembly line manufacturing, gargantuan steel mill operations, complex monumental bridge construction and increasingly mechanized farming were documented and distilled by many talented, determined and courageous women. They broke many norms of traditional society to express their beliefs and document through their own perspectives the changes in America via innovative and resonant aesthetic statements which encompass the term Modernism. However, overall acceptance of women as equals in terms of marital duties, ownership of property, freedom of movement and travel, and access to higher level work opportunities remained relatively limited.

Then the devastating economic Depression hit America quickly with the stock crash of October 28, 1929. This radical upheaval in many American's lives especially the poorer working class, single women, African-Americans and many other ethnic minorities took a devastating toll on the workforce and psyche of millions of Americans. Many wage earners became unemployed in households where women often worked as unpaid caregivers to their husbands, children and the elderly. Many families had to leave their homes and regions in search of some kind of employment. This upheaval affected both urban and rural communities.

However, these upheavals gave many intrepid women the opportunity to document these devastating changes through the federal government's RA, FSA, WPAP, WPA, FAP programs throughout much of the United States. These positions were available to many women, to draw attention through photography to the brutal desperate realities of the Depression for millions of people. The extensive press coverage through magazines like Time, Life, Look and many others generated more legislative, financial and social support support for these unfortunate people.

Works in the Exhibition

Laura Gilpin in her exquisitely toned platinum photograph *Iris*, 1924 is working in the ethereal Pictorialist style that was informed by the French Barbizon/American Tonalist spiritually infused, subtly hued paintings and watercolors. Also, this photograph has affinities with the reductive elegant asymmetrical Japoniste style of Ukiyo-e woodcut artists of the late 18th and early 19th century such as Utagawa Hiroshige and Kitagawa Utamaro.

Alice Schille demonstrates her broad repertoire of well executed Post-Impressionist styles including Fauvism in *Tunis Market*, and *Colorful Harbor Boulogne*, Neo-Impressionism in *Provence*, Cezannesque pictorial structure in *New Mexico Hills* and Nabis influenced evocative, flat decorative design in *Mother and Child In Archway, Mexico*. Schille infuses all these works with a lyrical engaging quality that goes beyond pictorial sophistication.

Jane Peterson was a slightly younger fellow exhibitor with Alice Schille, especially in nationally juried watercolor exhibitions. She did not have the aesthetic range of Schille. However, she was adept at handling opaque watercolor (gouache) often in combination with traditional watercolor to create sophisticated Post Impressionist flat decorative designs. These were complemented by exuberant dashes of color and sinuous Art Nouveau inspired orchestration of line for a lyrical cadence of sunlit forms. *The Pier, Edgartown*, one of her masterworks, epitomizes her style at its apex.

Edna Hopkins' *Pink Chrysanthemums* has an elegant asymmetrical design, delicate undulating use of line and subtle color harmonies that recalls her professor Arthur Dow's commentary about the use of *notan* (delicate balance of light and dark) by Japanese woodcut masters. Whereas Hopkins' *Hollyhocks* has a more flat, densely patterned Nabis influenced design and Fauvist accents of color.

Ethel Mars, her friend and fellow expatriate modern progressive artist in France at that time, also utilizes flat decorative design, asymmetrical diagonal movement, and expressive punctuation of rich colors to animate her three woodcuts *La Coiffure*, *Two Women at Conac*, and *Two Women Walk*. Maud Squire, a fellow Post-impressionist and Mars' partner uses similar pictorial strategies in her color etchings *Dimanche au Cafe, Toque de 1912(Paris)* and *Women Mending*. However, her works have more of a psychological edge than those of Ethel Mars.

Grace Martin Taylor, who was a fellow Provincetown printmaker with Blanche Lazzell, her cousin and mentor, utilizes more saturated colors in her richly textured sculptural original woodblocks themselves which are exceptional works of art in their own right. Her use of exuberant colors and a more Cezannesque physicality of her forms in *Lotus* and a different block *Monongahela* impart a unique expressive quality to her woodblocks of the 1920's and 1930's.

Blanche Lazzell, who is internationally recognized for her innovative, extremely well executed "white-line" woodcuts is represented in this exhibition with her highly creative, abstract batik, *Halloween* which is a function of her love of that mischievous magical holiday and her passion for vibrantly hued work in various "Arts and Crafts" media such as hooked rugs. She did fine work in these alternative media which were included in her major exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in 2002, which traveled to the outstanding Cleveland Museum of Art as well.

Precisionism and its photographic equivalent, f/64 Straight photography, is very well represented in this exhibition by Margaret Bourke-White's rare iconic *Saw Blade Indiana Limestone Company* which epitomizes her ability to make precise yet captivating tactile ground-breaking industrial photographs that transcend the mundane depiction of industrial production, buildings and products. Fortune's founder Henry Luce

immediately recognized her extraordinary abilities and hired her for his new venture when he viewed a suite of her dynamic *Otis Steel Mill* images. These were photographed between 1927 and 1929 by her in dangerous conditions with great perseverance and creativity with the aid of huge magnesium flares in the cavernous spaces enlivened by blazing white hot glowing iron and carbon being transformed into steel. She captured the aura of these monumental steel mills and industry, in general, at that time.

Hay fork, Northern Oregon farm. Morrow Country, Oregon, by Dorothea Lange is an austere yet iconic image of two hayforks resting against a plain farm building. It is a subtle yet apt metaphor for the hardscrabble farmers who toiled often with simple tools to eke out a humble yet proud living. This photograph has the purity and depth of expression of her friend Walker Evans' finest photographs such as *Kitchen Wall Buck Fields' House Hale County, Alabama*, 1936. Yet there is a glimmer of dignified endurance that is singular to most of Dorothea Lange's Depression era photographs such as *Wife and sick child of tubercular itinerant stranded in New Mexico*, c.1935.

Margaret Bourke-White's documentary depictions in her Depression period photographs of impoverished individuals, families, and workers often have a dignified sense of resolve regardless of their deplorable situation that distinguishes her images. *Lockett, Georgia*, which captures the quiet dignity of an elderly weathered woman who looks directly and clearly at the photographer with steadfast faith.

Marion Post Wolcott, a less well known but outstanding photographer from the FSA period, as demonstrated in her masterful *Old Negro near Camden, Alabama* inventively evokes the brutal reality of living in the racist South as an African American during hard times even for his white overseers whose legislative mandates and cultural norms sought to marginalize them. The cropped faceless image of an elderly impoverished man with damaged hands from hard labor sits back with quiet dignity on a worn chair in his hand "quilted" patchwork of trousers with a stoic will to endure. The photographer's technical ability to depict the rough-hewn features of this workworn anonymous man speaks to the suffering of thousands of others like him.

The quiet self-effacing New Mexican artist, Gene Kloss, changed her first name Geneva to that of a man to enable her to participate in juried print exhibitions in her original home in the "progressive" San Francisco region in the early 1920's. She moved permanently to northern New Mexico in the late 1920's because of her deep interest in the culture and rituals of the indigenous Pueblo tribes of that isolated region. She also was inspired by the ascetic lifestyle of the Penitente Hispanic Catholic sects of this remote sanctuary from the strict dogma of the Roman Catholic Church. Her exquisite command of the difficult media of aquatint combined with etching or drypoint enabled her to create ethereal, well rendered and poignant forms of the mysterious rituals of the Penitentes. Kloss' *Processional - New Mexico Church* and *Taos in Winter* evoke the simplicity and unadorned spirituality of these hard working, humble family farmers, shepherds, and craftsmen. The reductive designs of many of her best prints lend a pure transcendent quality to these personally inked, prepared and printed works by the artist without assistants.

Whereas Ruth Bernhard's enigmatic surreal photographically realized doll-like forms as exemplified by her wonderful *Creation* evoke the beauty, vulnerability, and magical mystery of human existence. She is also well recognized for the tactile beautiful physicality of her flawlessly photographed and creatively articulated nude female forms created from the late 1930's through the 1990's. Her unabashed depiction of these personae address feminists' search for self expression and independent lives.

Lotti Jacobe's innovative photogenic work, ironically grounded in the invention of camera obscura to capture forms without film started in the 16th century. Her ingenious manipulation of light to yield unique lyrical multi-faceted often interlinked forms that have a contemporary scientific quality that is

extraordinary. Many of her best camera-less images were created in the 1940's and 1950's such as *Untitled, photogenic*, c. 1946-1955.

In summation, the accomplished diversity of expression as evidenced by the various tenets of Modern styles are well represented in this exhibition. Many of these works were courageously created in spite of taboos pertaining to women creating serious photography and art in any media in a field dominated by men as artists, gallerists, teachers, museum curators and directors at that time.

We hope that you will join us to enjoy the exhibition.