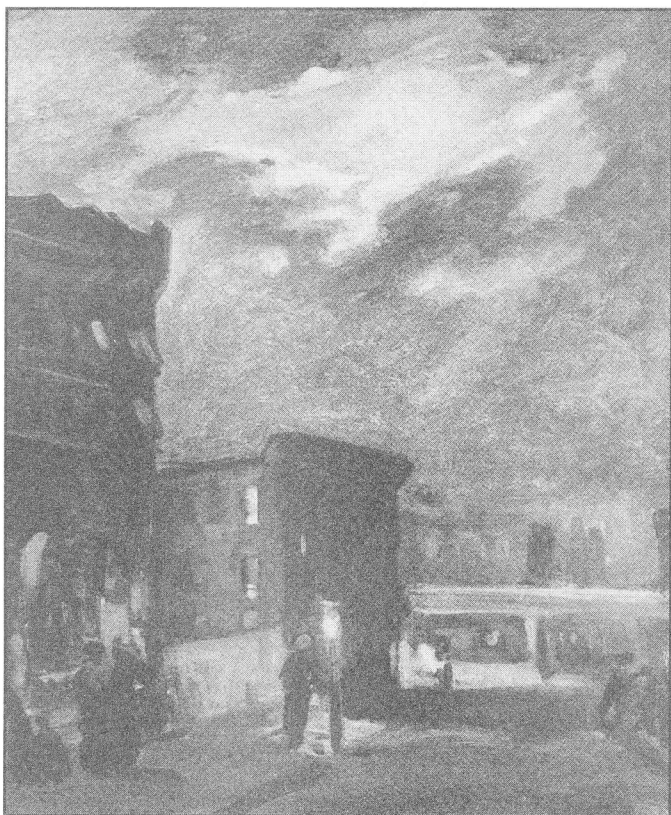


# Theresa Bernstein

## «PEOPLE AND PLACES»

A RETROSPECTIVE



NEW YORK STREET ca. 1913

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**THE PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF JUDAICA**  
**Congregation Rodeph Shalom**

People and places, places and people, places inflected by the presence of people — this is what Theresa Bernstein (1890- ) has been painting for over eighty years. A native of Philadelphia, Bernstein took courses at The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, graduated from the Philadelphia School of Design for Women, (now the Moore College of Art) and completed her art education under William Merritt Chase at the Art Students League in New York City. She moved with her family to New York City in 1912, where — except for the summers in Gloucester, Massachusetts — she has lived and worked.

Bernstein was a member of a loose association of American artists famous for its subgroups such as the Ashcan School, The Eight, and the New York Realists. Their place in American art has long puzzled critics and cultural historians. To some, they appear to be no more than the tag-end of nineteenth-century representational art before the advent of modernism. Others argue that they liberated art from the confines of nineteenth-century stodginess and ushered it energetically into the twentieth century. There was no doubt in the minds of the artists that what they were doing was “modern,” by which they meant, committed to contemporary subject matter and an expressive style. Their chief spokesperson, Robert Henri, pronounced in 1910:

Art cannot be separated from life. It is the expression of the greatest need of which life is capable, and we value art not because of the skilled product, but because of its revelation of a life experience.

As an outstanding proponent of the principles and practices of Henri and his group, Theresa Bernstein pursued parallel subject matter and for a time painted in a similar style. Like her fellow urban enthusiasts, she depicted thronged streets and New York brownstones, but also struck out on her own to embrace a wider variety of city subjects. What differentiated her most was that she saw the city and its hustle and bustle *as a woman* and therefore observed and incorporated in her art, types and activities ignored by others. Thus, she painted women readers using the New York Public Library, women traveling unchaperoned on the El, women making hats, women studying art, the tension of women waiting for work in an employment office.

Throughout her career but especially during the period 1910-30, Bernstein's style was often referred to as “masculine.” Bernstein arrived onto the art scene at a time when artistic style was increasingly constructed along gender lines. A brash, strong painterly style became associated with maleness rather than an assertive personality or even just an extroverted means of expression. A more “delicate” rendering reflected a feminine sensibility. Bernstein both suffered and benefited from this dichotomy. She was applauded for painting “like a man,” that is, with strength and vigor, but the implication was that she did so at the cost of her womanliness.

In 1916, Bernstein discovered Gloucester, Massachusetts, a historic fishing center where a summer art colony was also developing. Fronting on a large and bustling harbor which provided endless subjects for viewing and picture-making, Gloucester was nevertheless small, intimate and rural compared to New York. Aspects of the town were problematic for Bernstein and her husband William Meyerowitz. It was elitist, they were populists; Republican, they were Democrats; consummately Christian, they were Jewish. They reacted by throwing themselves into life there — painting, teaching, entering into art competitions, entertaining, and growing vegetables. A rapprochement was formed, and they became beloved and enduring fixtures of the local cultural scene. Bernstein seldom painted pure landscapes or seascapes, characteristically preferring scenes of activity — the concatenation of noise, people and boats at harborside, children playing, art students on their way to lessons. “People paintings” constitute an important part of her oeuvre and her highest achievement. In these, she creates highly charged group scenes that express and release the synergy to be found in such encounters. Whether she is depicting bathers at a Gloucester beach on a hot summer day, the pageantry and civic joy of a New York armistice parade, or the purposefulness of a suffragette demonstration, Bernstein prefers to show people en mass. In depicting strangers side by side glancing at the war news on theater marquee, watching the movies, looking at a parade, or catching the El, she sees them united by the experience in a special bond. The anomie and cynicism of the late twentieth century had not yet developed; the kind of connectedness that she posits reflects not only the exuberance of her personality but the optimism of her generation. Bernstein’s “community-scapes” offer consoling images to viewers of the 1990’s nostalgic for such a sense of community. With considerable success, she has become the mythologizer of certain kind of American dream — one that valorizes community life.

Her paintings based on Jewish subject matter also tend to emphasize community aspects, such as public celebrations and religious observances. *Jewish Wedding* celebrates a joyous union in Jerusalem. In *Prayer*, which features a rhythmic pattern created out of profiled heads, Bernstein successfully individualizes the worshippers, while at the same time preserving their identity as a group. An exception is what she refers to as a symbolic documentary, such as *Seder*, in which she uses traditional still life to communicate a religious experience. By depicting the sacred vessels in a dizzying cascade of paint, she animates the canvas and creates an aura of vibrant spirituality.

For Bernstein, vitalistic expressive realism was not simply a fashion; one of the many avant garde styles that succeeded each other with great rapidity in the twentieth century, but a lifelong ethical and ideological commitment. By continuing to paint from life — hippies in the sixties, basketball games and a smoochathon in the seventies, break dancers in the eighties — using the dynamic, ges-

tural strokes that had long served her expressive needs, she achieved a kind of continuity in her work that she needed. As long as she drew from contemporary experience, she felt that she was living up to that noble ideal of art defined by Henri in the early years of the century.

The energy the New York Realists brought to art, the integrity they applied to its practice, and the humanism of their search for the authentic, made an important contribution to the artistic life of this century. Of this movement, Theresa Bernstein was a visible and enthusiastic part.

This exhibition marks Theresa Bernstein's first major professional appearance in Philadelphia, the city of her birth. It seems appropriate that it take place through the sponsorship of the Philadelphia Museum of Judaica of Congregation Rodeph Shalom, which has established such a strong and enduring commitment to the fine arts.

*Curator of Exhibition*

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