A CENTURY OF ART

Bernstein’s early paintings influenced by Ashcan realism and tonalism

BY WILL BROODUS

Theresa Bernstein, a Gloucester artist, liked to paint people who are absorbed in something — music, worship or a game of chess.

"Music Love," for example, depicts a woman lifting her head as she listens to a performance. We can’t see her eyes, which are shaded and may be closed, or her hands, or express concentration, but by the way she is right clutching a bag at her side, while the left settles on the back of a chair, its white gloving at the center of the canvas.

The paintings is part of an exhibit, "Theresa Bernstein: A Century in Art," now at Endicott College, that aims to inspire that same kind of close attention to this neglected American artist.

The title refers to the fact that Bernstein, who lived until two weeks before her 112th birthday in 2002, exhibited her art to every decade of the 20th century. But the show, which includes 44 works, draws mostly from the first two decades of that long career.

But as art historian Elise Heung points out, in a book that accompanies this exhibit, there are important differences between Bernstein's art and that of the Ashcan School. She didn’t train as an illustrator, or in newspaper and magazines, as the Ashcan artists did, and her paintings are more formal than the rapid compositions they produced.

Her urban subjects also tend to be drawn from libraries and concert halls rather than bars and boxing clubs, which gives them a sense of decorum that the Ashcan artists lacked.

"She filled her paintings of Cape Ann with people and activities, Pieta, the beaches, the streets. She documented real life here," Ronda Filho of the Cape Ann Museum has said.

She contributed to the development of Cape Ann as an artist colony through Gallery-on-the-Moors and the North Shore Arts Association, said Filho.

There are also elements in her work from an earlier American movement, tonalism, which she absorbed from one of her earliest teachers.

"Those romantic skies, moonlit skies, come out of William Dargemolais, with whom she studied in Philadelphia and North Carolina," Levin said.

In "New York Street" from 1912, Bernstein paints figures looking towards the light cast from doorways and street lamps, an urban scene that could fit in any Ashcan exhibit. But the sky above the city, where heavy cloud cover parts to reveal a bright, white moon, has a dramatic quality that hearkens back to a tonalist like Albert Pinkham Ryder.

The music lovers in "Carnegie Hall with Paderewski," from 1914, listen to music with powerfull atitude while standing in dim light at the back of the hall. Such light, barely strong enough to illuminate the figures but which mysteriously also seems to create them, is another signature element in tonalist painting.

Bernstein’s style became much brower in the 1900’s, partly inspired by her growing love of jazz, Levin said.

She also began to work with brighter colors, which she had seen in the works of expressionist painters like Edouard Munch, Vassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc during three trips to Europe.

Paintings such as "Crippage Players," from 1907 and "The Chass Players," from 1902, both painted in Gloucester, where she often spent summers, are created with furious brush strokes that leave portions of the canvas bare, incorporating its white surface into the composition.

Bernstein also came to favor groups as subjects, and as faceless crowds, rather than as individuals.

She continued to win prizes and receive favorable reviews until the 1960s, when her reputation began to fade, Levin said.

The may have been due to her marriage in 1910 to painter and printmaker Walter Meyerowitz, whose work she promoted more vigorously than her own, Levin said.

The art market also may have been a culprit, as a closed network of galleries and collectors emerged that favored male artists, limiting women to exhibiting in group shows run by associations.

"She continued to make art until she was 110, but it was still remarkable," Levin said. "It was more than just Ashcan painting."

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