

A CENTURY OF ART

Bernstein's early paintings influenced by Ashcan realism and tonalism

BY WILL BROADDUS
STAFF WRITER

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

"Music Lover," for example, depicts a woman tilting her head as she listens to a performance. We can't see her eyes, which are shaded and may be closed

■ **If you go information, see Page 10.**

or simply staring into space as she focuses inwardly. But her hands express concentration, the right clutching a bag

at her side, while the left settles on the back of a chair, its white glove glowing at the center of the canvas.

The painting 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 in every decade of the 20th century. But the show, which includes 44 works, draws mostly from the first two decades of that long career.

See **BERNSTEIN**, Page 10



"Woman with Parrot," 1917, by Theresa Bernstein. Martin and Edith Stein Collection.

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See video of "A Century in Art" while on exhibit in New York, and on the origin and inspiration for the show.

■ *Continued from Page 9*

IF YOU GO

■ **Who and what:** "Theresa Bernstein: A Century in Art"

■ **When:** Through July 11. Gallery hours: Tuesday and Friday, 3 to 6 p.m.; Wednesday, Thursday and weekends, noon to 6 p.m.; closed Monday.

■ **Where:** Heftler Visiting Artist Gallery, Walter J. Manninen Center for the Arts at Endicott College, 376 Hale St., Beverly.

■ **Related events:** Gallery talk by Gail Levin on Friday, May 9, at 2 p.m., followed by a panel discussion from 3 to 4:45 p.m., and a reception and book signing.

■ **How much:** Free admission to exhibit and events.

■ **Information:** www.endicott.edu/centerforthearts or 978-232-2655.

"I emphasize the early years, when she was most famous, because I wanted to revive her reputation," said Gail Levin, who teaches art history at the City University of New York and organized the exhibit.

Bernstein, who was born in Poland in 1890, attended the Philadelphia School of Design for Women from 1907 to 1911. She moved to New York in 1912, and by 1913 was starting to exhibit at the MacDowell Club, often with artists of the Ashcan School such as John Sloan and Robert Henri.

She first visited Gloucester in 1916 and bought a house on Mount Pleasant Street in 1924 with artist husband William Meyerowitz.

Bernstein had affinities with the Ashcan School, which used a dark palette to capture scenes of urban life, and preferred their work to the radical experiments she saw at the Armory Show of 1913.

"Ashcan School realism is a kind of modernism," Levin said. "It's no longer myths and prettified subject matter."

But as art historian Elsie 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 for newspapers 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, Fiesta, the beaches, the streets. She documented real life here," Ronda Faloo 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 Faloo.

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 Elliott Daingerfield, with whom she studied in Philadelphia and North Carolina," Levin said.

In "New York Street" from 1912, Bernstein paints figures loitering in 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 harkens back to a tonalist like

Albert Pinkham Ryder.

The music lovers in "Carnegie Hall with Paderewski," from 1914, listen to music with prayerful attitudes 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 looser in the 1920s, 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 Edvard Munch, Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc during three trips to Europe.

Paintings such as "Cribbage Players" from 1927 and "The Chess Players" from 1932, both painted in Gloucester, where she often spent summers, are created with loose brush strokes that leave portions of the canvas bare, incorporating its white surface into the composition.

Bernstein also came to favor groups as subjects, either as faceless crowds where the emphasis is on spectacle, or as collections of lovingly rendered individuals.

She continued to win prizes and receive favorable reviews until the 1940s, when her reputation started to fade, Levin said. That may have been due to her marriage in 1919 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, dealers 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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"Lillies of the Field," 1915, by Theresa Bernstein.