

# Theresa Bernstein, an Ash Can School Artist, Dies at 111

By DOUGLAS MARTIN

Theresa Bernstein, who as a member of the Ash Can School of realistic painting was both hailed and flailed for "painting like a man" in the 1910's and then continued to generate vibrant canvases for eight more decades, died in Manhattan on Tuesday. She was generally believed to be 111 and lived in Manhattan and Gloucester, Mass.

She died at Mount Sinai Hospital, Suzanne Laurier, a friend for 23 years, said. Ms. Laurier said she had reason to believe Ms. Bernstein may have been as much as five years older, a view others echo.

Ms. Bernstein, who has no survivors, was never particularly helpful on the subject.

"I'm old enough to keep it to myself," she said in an interview with *The Boston Globe* in 1998.

Her paintings now sell for \$100,000 in galleries. She originally gained recognition as one of the first women to paint in the Realist style, favoring the informal composition and contemporary subject matter typical of the movement. She hardly advertised her sex: she signed her gritty paintings of urban scenes with her last name or "T. Bernstein."

Indeed, at the beginning of her career, the important thing to some seemed to be that she had somehow transcended being a woman.

"It is with a man's vision that this artist looks at her subjects — in the streets, the elevated trains, at the beaches, in the parks, the lobbies of theaters, in seaport places or in a church," Frederick James Gregg wrote in *The New York Herald* in a review of her first solo show in 1919.

"Then having found what she wants, it is with a man's vigor that she gets it down to stay," he continued.

Writing in the *American Art Review* in April 2001, Patricia M. Burnham countered that Ms. Bernstein, for all her so-called "masculine" vigor, showed a decidedly feminine sensibility.

"She saw as a woman, perceived the city and its hustle and bustle very much from a woman's point of view," she wrote. "As a result, she incorporated into her art types and activities ignored by her male counterparts: women readers using the New York Public Library, traveling unchaperoned on the el, making hats, creating art in the company of other women, applying for jobs."

Others insist that her work, as particularly evidenced by her forceful brush strokes, spoke for itself.

"She was just a great painter, period," said Jan Ramirez, director of the New-York Historical Society's museum.

When Ms. Ramirez organized an exhibition of Ms. Bernstein's work in 1991, in her previous job as a curator at the Museum of the City of New



Tom Herde/The Boston Globe



Collection of the Museum of the City of New York

Theresa Bernstein at her home in Gloucester, Mass., in 1998, and one of her works, "Bryant Park" (1914).

York, it was Ms. Bernstein's first museum exhibition since 1948. There have since been museum exhibitions in Philadelphia, Boston and Stamford, Conn., and three one-person shows at Joan Whalen Fine Art in Manhattan.

Her paintings are in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Institution,

*Living long enough  
to be acclaimed,  
forgotten and  
acclaimed again.*

the Chicago Art Institute, the New York Public Library and the Brooklyn Museum. She has had more than 40 solo exhibitions.

Ms. Bernstein admitted to being born on March 1, 1890, according to several published accounts. But Ms. Laurier, who knew Ms. Bernstein's husband of 62 years, the painter and etcher William Meyerowitz, said he told her and others that his wife was two years older than he was; if so, she would have turned 116 in two weeks.

Records of the Philadelphia School of Design for Women indicate, however, that Ms. Bernstein enrolled in 1907 at age 17, making her 111 at her death.

Her father was a textile manufacturer and her mother an accomplished pianist. As a girl, she made several trips to Europe with her mother and was impressed by Expressionist painters like Edvard Munch. After attending the Philadelphia art school, now the Moore College of Art and Design, she moved to New York and joined the Art Students League, where she studied portrait painting with William Merritt Chase.

She met Mr. Meyerowitz when he noticed one of her paintings at a show and dropped by to ask her for a donation to a charity that gave artworks to the poor.

"Oh, I thought you were an older man," Mr. Meyerowitz said to Ms. Bernstein, who was then probably 29. She gave him several paintings, and their courtship started. Shortly after they were married, she had a baby girl named Isadora, who died two months later.

The two often painted side by side, but Mr. Meyerowitz was much more publicly prominent. Three years after his death, she revealed hundreds of her own paintings.

When she visited the Museum of the City of New York in the late 1980's to discuss a possible exhibition of her husband's work, curators decided to exhibit her work instead.

"All told, his subject matter is not in any way revolutionary," Ms. Ramirez said. "She was far more the iconoclast of the two."

She loved to paint groups of people. Her studies of suffrage parades in 1912 led to a series of works from

1916 to 1919 that documented the patriotic displays of World War I. She became close to members of The Eight, as the Ashcan School was also called, and her urban landscapes reflected this influence.

She was also associated with the Philadelphia 10, a group of women who had studied art in Philadelphia.

Her early reputation was suggested by a review in *The New York Times* on March 13, 1927, comparing the emotions evoked by her art to "this little cavorting fling that reminds one of colts in pasture."

By the 1930's, she did not follow the art world toward greater abstraction, though her husband did. Even as her palate exploded with inspired colors — salmon skies and charreuse cheeks — her mission became one of breaking down the barrier between high art and everyday people.

"In some ways, Bernstein is a Thornton Wilder of the canvas," Ms. Burnham wrote, offering "consoling and nostalgic images to viewers of the 21st century."

Her determination was legendary. When she broke her right hand, she painted with her left. When she could no longer hold a brush, she painted by squirting paint from tubes.

And she never lost her eye for a touching scene. On a Valentine's Day several years ago, Ms. Laurier pushed her wheelchair past a store where a couple were kissing in the window as part of a promotion.

"Get my sketch pad," Ms. Bernstein commanded.