

# A Painter Wins a New Lease on Fame

By TRISH HALL

Theresa Bernstein knows that eventually she will always be asked the question that must have become so tedious: What's your secret? How did you manage to become 100 years old? (Or 101 or 102 — she never will feebly say.)

She offers the answer, kindly, without waiting for the question to be posed: "I don't judge people. I accept them as they are. Other people want to change their friends. You can't change anyone. You don't push people into your mold. If you do that, you're never going to have a lot of friends. The secret of my survival is, I have many people."

Neither did she judge herself, or allow the judgments of others to seep into her bones. Through this whole century she has painted the world as she has come upon it, sometimes selling her paintings as quickly as she could finish them, sometimes selling nothing.

Although it is not fair to say that she is unknown, some art historians believe she has been overlooked. Miss

Whether from years of not caring or just from bravado, she appears to be unaffected by the experience of being discovered in her second century.

"I'm very busy doing what I'm doing, and I'm not that anxious for people to come and bother me," she said. "You could waste your whole day." She likes people, though, and is willing to share her time. Last week she spent several hours at the Museum of the City of New York talking about her work to graduate students from the City University of New York. She has actually known people the students know only as legends, not beings who could have drawn breath in the lifetime of the woman in their midst — people like Marcel Duchamp, a friend, and Louise Nevelson, who once studied with her.

Later, in the West Side loft she has occupied since the 1930's, she sat on the edge of an awesome clutter, of paintings and papers and chairs and couches seemingly flung at random in a studio that could serve as a stage set for the life of a bohemian, the life of a woman who obviously did not care about the things women were supposed to want, like curtains.

## A Devoted Wife

But in another way she lived the archetypal woman's life, devoting herself to her husband, William Meyerowitz, and his career as an artist. They were married for more than 60 years. He died 10 years ago and people who know her say she worked tirelessly in his behalf, always promoting his work before her own.

Indeed, a few years ago she wrote to the Museum of the City of New York suggesting that it mount a show of his work. But the museum was much more interested in her. Jan Seidler Ramirez, the curator of paintings and sculpture, had recently seen one of Miss Bernstein's paintings in a gallery exhibition and had been stunned by its strength.

"I wondered who this person was," she said, "and why she had eluded my general knowledge."

Miss Bernstein's work, she said, places her in the Ashcan School, painters who showed the hard and gritty side of life. But she is not as well known as she should be, Dr. Ramirez said, adding:

"She was perpetually overlooked. She knew all the important painters, but she chose to be a wife, and to make her husband's life as comfortable as possible. She's just a modest person."

## 'Top-Rate' Colorist'

Miss Bernstein's work is special in two ways, Dr. Ramirez said. "There is this remarkable embrace of urban life, and as a colorist she was top-rate," he said.

The guest curator for the show was Michele Cohen, an art historian who said she hoped that Miss Bernstein's work would gain attention because it is important. "She deserves recogni-

tion as a painter," she said. "I don't want her to be trivialized as someone who is interesting because she is old."

Miss Bernstein, who grew up in Philadelphia and dropped out of high school to take art classes, had her first one-woman show in 1919 at the Milch Gallery in New York. Despite such early recognition, Ms. Cohen said, she was regularly excluded from certain institutions and competitions because she was a woman.

Miss Bernstein said: "My work has been cut up and stolen and had things thrown at it — ink, mud. Maybe they didn't want me to be known."

She and her husband painted in New York and in Gloucester, Mass., where they spent summers. They always supported themselves by selling their work and occasionally by teaching, but they never took full-time jobs in universities that would have seemingly made life easier.

Miss Bernstein believed that she had to avoid the softness that would come with a guaranteed paycheck that could one day disappear, leaving her vulnerable. "If you don't put yourself in that exposed position," she said, "you retain that resiliency."

## At 100, Theresa Bernstein remains modest.

Bernstein didn't mind, maybe because attitudes toward art, money and fame were different then. "I never got frustrated, because I didn't expect anything," she said. "I enjoyed painting the works I did. I didn't do it for public acclaim."

Now, though, some 45 of her paintings, mostly from the second decade of the century, are being displayed, through the end of March, at the Museum of the City of New York. A show of her watercolors from the 1920's is on display at the Sragow Gallery in SoHo. She is also to receive an award in Washington from the Women's Caucus for Art.

The museum show, perhaps the most extensive of her career, includes vivid oil paintings that capture the days of ordinary New Yorkers in the century's teens and 20's. They show the activities and places that created the texture of the time—a suffrage meeting, a trolley, Easter morning in a Polish church, an Armistice Day parade, a Coney Island beach.

Especially striking are her paintings of working women, making hats or teaching kindergarten in a settlement house. Even when she painted magnificent places, like the Metropolitan Opera House, she showed all layers of society.

She still paints and draws all the time, with hands that are limber and always moving. The nails manicured.