



Betty Parsons in an interview with Barbaralee Diamonstein on YouTube.

Parsons, Betty (1900-1982)

by Tee A. Corinne

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American artist and gallery owner Betty Parsons retreated into the closet during the McCarthy years, but she supported gay, lesbian, and bisexual artists during a period of repression.

Betty Bierne Pierson was born into a wealthy New York City family in 1900. Influenced by the innovative art she saw in the famous Armory show of 1913, she sought out what she thought of as "new" in art for the rest of her life.

In 1920, she married Schuyler Livingston Parsons (1892-1967), a rich, homosexual alcoholic, eight years her senior. The marriage lasted three years.

Betty Parsons, as she would be known for the rest of her life, divorced in Paris in 1923 and remained there for the next decade, supported by alimony. She sought out older members of the expatriate lesbian community such as Natalie Clifford Barney, Romaine Brooks, Sylvia Beach, Gertrude Stein, and Alice B. Toklas.

She had her portrait made by photographer Berenice Abbott, two years her senior, and was taken under the wing of Janet Flanner, who wrote for *The New Yorker* under the pen name "Genet."

For eight of the ten years Parsons lived in Paris, she conducted a love affair with a woman, the English painter Adge Baker, with whom she maintained a friendship for the rest of her life.

The great depression ended Parsons' financial support. She returned to the United States in 1933. She spent two years in southern California where she had male lovers, crushes on a few women, and a serious flirtation--if not actual sex--with Greta Garbo.

After serving an apprenticeship in the New York art world, Parsons opened the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York City in 1946. Through exhibiting select abstract art and giving the Abstract Expressionists their first public exposure, the gallery became one of the most prestigious of the mid-twentieth century. It closed in 1981, a year before Parsons' death.

From the mid-1940s until the mid-1950s, Parsons was involved in a passionate--though not exclusive--relationship with actress and painter Strelsa van Scriver (ca 1915-1963). Quite open about her lesbianism while she lived in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, she, however, became closeted in the more repressive atmosphere of the United States following World War II.

Nevertheless, Parsons exhibited the work of a number of lesbian and gay male artists, including Sonia Sekula (1918-1963), a Swiss-born openly lesbian painter, and the much more private Agnes Martin (b. 1912). Among the gay male or bisexual artists whose work she sponsored are Forrest Bess (1911-1977), Theodoros Stamos (1922-1997), Ellsworth Kelly (b. 1923), Robert Rauschenberg (b. 1925), and Alfonso Ossorio (1916-1990).

Parsons was also herself an artist. Each summer she closed the gallery and concentrated on her own painting and sculpture, ultimately showing in high profile galleries.

Conscious of the homophobia in the art world and fearful of being ostracized, Parsons maintained an air of privacy about her personal life. Yet she agreed to biographer Lee Hall's request for full disclosure about her life. Parsons' forthrightness allowed Hall to write about Parsons' life with an unusual openness, which was not how she lived.

Parsons' support of gay, lesbian, and bisexual artists at a time of social oppression and her willingness to have the fullness of her life shared in her biography mark important contributions to lesbian and gay history and culture.

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About the Author

Tee A. Corinne was a photographer and writer. Her articles about lesbian art and artists appeared in numerous journals and encyclopedias. Her books include *The Cunt Coloring Book*, *Yantras of Womanlove*, *Dreams of the Woman Who Loved Sex*, *Courting Pleasure*, and *Intimacies*. She was the editor of *FABB: The Feminist Art Books Bulletin*, co-editor of the *Queer Caucus for Art Newsletter*, and member of the editorial advisory board of www.glbtc.com.