A Brief History of American Abstract Artists and the Women Who Helped to Make it

Compiled by Creighton Michael for American Abstract Artists
The art world of New York City in 1900-1936

Women’s Art Club founded in 1889 (1913) The Association of Women Painters and Sculptors
   (1941) The National Association of Women Artists
“Ashcan School”

Alfred Stieglitz’s galleries: 291 1905-1917   Intimate Gallery 1925-29   An American Place 1929-1946
Association of American Painters and Sculptors 1912-1916 organized the “1913 Armory Show”

Whitney Studio opens in 1914 becomes The Whitney Studio Club in 1918 (Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney)

Society of Independent Artists 1916-1951
Société Anonyme, Inc. 1920-1940

New York Society of Women Artists 1925-   Theresa Ferber Bernstein is an early member

Gallery of Living Art opens in 1927 changes to “Museum” in 1936, closes in 1942 (A.E. Gallatin)

MOMA opens in 1929

The Whitney Museum of American Art opens in 1930

American Abstract Artists 1936-
Women of the “Ashcan School”

The term “Ashcan” may have originated from an article published in *The Masses* describing current paintings as "pictures of ashcans and girls hitching up their skirts on Horatio Street.” Initially known as “The Eight” referring to their first exhibition in New York at the Macbeth Gallery in 1908, the group was later dubbed “The Apostles of Ugliness” by critics upset with their unvarnished depiction of urban life.

Thomas Pollock Anshutz
Gifford Beal
George Bellows
Glenn O. Coleman
Arthur Bowen Davies
Abastenia St. Leger Eberle
William Glackens
Robert Henri (Robert Henry Cozad)
Eugene Higgins
Lewis Hine
Edward Hopper

George Luks
Amy Londoner
Theresa Ferber Bernstein
Jerome Myers
Maurice Prendergast
Jacob Riis
Margaret Sargent
Everett Shinn
John French Sloan
Carl Sprinchorn
Women of the “Ashcan School”

Theresa Bernstein  *Polish Church: Easter Morning*, 1916
Collection: Boca Raton Museum of Art

Margarett Sargent  *Women and Mirror (Self-portrait with Model)*, 1933-1936
Collection: Cape Ann Museum, Gloucester, MA

Amy Londoner  *Cafe Elegant*  
c.1925  Private Collection

Abastenia St. Leger Eberle  *Woman Picking Up Coal*  1908  
Private Collection
The exhibition also traveled to Boston and was installed at the Copley Society of Art. Due to the lack of space, work by American artists was removed.
Women Participating in The International Exhibition of Modern Art
“1913 Armory Show” 48 out of 300 artists participating were women.

Florence Howell Barkley
Marion H. Beckett
Bessie Marsh Brewer
Fannie Miller Brown
Edith Woodman Burroughs
Mary Cassatt
Émilie Charmy
Nessa Cohen
Kate Cory
Edith Dimock (Mrs. William Glackens)
Katherine S. Dreier
Aileen King Dresser
Florence Dreyfous
Abastenia St. Leger Eberle
Florence Esté
Lily Everett
Mary Foote
Anne Goldthwaite
Edith Haworth
Margaret Hoard
Margaret Wendell Huntington
Gwen John
Grace Mott Johnson
Edith L. King

Hermine E. Kleinert
Marie Laurencin
Amy Londoner
Jacqueline Marval
Carolyn Mase
Kathleen McEnery
Charlotte Meltzer
Myra Musselmann-Carr
Ethel Myers
Helen J. Niles
Olga Oppenheimer
Marjorie Organ (Mrs. Robert Henri)
Josephine Paddock
Agnes Lawrence Pelton
Harriet Sophia Phillips
Louise Pope
May Wilson Preston
Katharine Rhoades
Mary Rogers
Frances Simpson Stevens
Bessie Potter Vonnoh
Hilda Ward
Enid Yandell
Marguerite Zorach
Katherine S. Dreier
Co-founder of Society of Independent Artists
and Société Anonyme

Marguerite Zorach

Abstract Portrait of Marcel Duchamp
Oil on canvas
18 x 32"
1918
Collection: MOMA

Half Dome, Yosemite, California
Watercolor over graphite on paper
10 x 13.3"
1920
Collection: Brooklyn Museum
Société Anonyme, Inc. was an art organization founded in 1920 (ended in 1940) by Katherine Dreier, Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp. The society sponsored lectures, concerts, publications, and exhibitions of modern art, including the International Exhibition of Modern Art at the Brooklyn Museum in 1926. The collection was donated to Yale in 1941. Man Ray chose the title incorrectly thinking anonyme in French meant “anonymous” when it actually translates as corporation. Duchamp added Inc. making the title in English, Corporation, Inc.
Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney
Artist, Patron and Founder of the Whitney Museum of American Art
1875-1942

In 1914 Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney opened the Whitney Studio an exhibition space for young and innovative artists near her own studio in Greenwich Village. The following year, she organized the Friends of the Young Artists, which would become by 1918 The Whitney Studio Club, hiring Juliana Force as its director. After the Metropolitan Museum of Art rejected her gift in 1929 of 500 plus works primarily by contemporary American artists, she decides to open The Whitney Museum of American Art in 1930, where it will remain at that location until 1954, when it moves temporary to West 53rd Street. Opening in the Whitney Museum’s original location on West 8th Street ten years later is the New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture founded by Mercedes Matter, artist, educator and one of the Founding Members of American Abstract Artists.

Portrait of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney
Edward Steichen
Gelatin silver print mount on board
16 5/8 x 13 7/16”
1931
Collection: Whitney Museum of American Art
Albert Eugene Gallatin
1881 Villanova, Pennsylvania - 1952 New York City

1920’s member of Société Anonyme, Inc
1927 opened Gallery of Living Art changed to “Museum” in 1936. It was the first museum devoted entirely to modern art. Closed in 1942
1937 joined American Abstract Artists with fellow “Park Avenue Cubists” George L.K. Morris, Suzy Frelinghuysen, and Charles G. Shaw. Helped to finance the first exhibition at the Squibb Gallery

A.E. Gallatin 1905
The Park Avenue Cubists

Charles Green Shaw
*Untitled Abstraction*
Oil on fiberboard
11.5 x 15.5”  1943
Collection: Smithsonian American Art Museum

George L. K. Morris
*Industrial Landscape*
Oil on canvas
49.5 x 63.5”  1936-1950
Collection: Smithsonian American Art Museum

Suzy Frelinghuysen
*Composition*
Oil and collage on board
40 x 30”  1943

A. E. Gallatin
*Untitled*
Oil on canvas
51 1/8 x 32 1/4”  1937
Collection: Brooklyn Museum of Art
Of the 39 Founding Members of American Abstract Artists
9 were women

Josef Albers 1888 Germany -1976 CT
Rosalind Bengelsdorf 1916-1979 NYC
Ilya Bolotowsky 1907 Russia- 1981 NYC
Harry Bowden 1907 LA-1965
Byron Browne 1907 Yonkers- 1961 NYC
Giorgio Cavallon 1904 Italy- 1989 NYC
Arthur N. Christie 1891 NJ- 1980 NJ
Anna Cohen
Burgoyne Diller 1906-1965 NYC
Werner Drewes 1899 Germany (Poland)-1985 VA
Ray Kaiser Eames 1912 CA-1988 CA
Herzl Emmanuel 1914 PA-2002 CT
Robert Foster
Balcomb Greene 1904 Millville, NY-1990 Montauk
Gertrude Greene 1904-1956 NYC
Hananiah Harari 1912 Rochester, NY-2000 Hawthorne, NY
Carl Holty, Germany 1900-1973 NYC
Harry Holtzman 1912 NYC-1987 Lyme, CT
Frederick Kann 1886 Czechoslovakia-1965 CA
Paul Kelpe 1902 Germany-1985 TX

Marie Kennedy
Leo Lances 1908/10-1981 CT
Ibram Lassaw 1913 Egypt-2003 East Hampton, NY
Agnes E. Lyall 1908 NJ-2013
Alice Trumbull Mason 1904 CT-1971 NYC
Mercedes Matter 1913 NYC - 2001 East Hampton
George McNeil 1908-1995 NYC
George L. K. Morris 1905 NYC-1975 MA
John Opper 1908 Chicago-1994 Amagansett, NY
Ralph R. Rosenborg 1913 Brooklyn-1992 Portland, OR
Louis Schanker 1903-1981 NYC
Charles G. Shaw 1892-1974 NYC
Esphyr Slobodkina 1908 Russia-2002 Glen Head, NY
Albert Swinden 1901 England-1961 NYC
R. D. Turnbull 1899 NJ-1943
Vaclav Vytlacil 1892-1984 NYC
Rudolph Weisenborn 1881 Germany-1974 Chicago
Frederick John Whiteman 1909- 1997 PA
W. M. (Wilfred) Zogbaum 1915 RI-1965 NYC
Marie Kennedy

*Untitled* 12 x 9 3/16” off set lithograph on paper 1937
Collection: Smithsonian American Art Museum
**Untitled** 12 x 9 3/16" off set lithograph on paper  1937

Collection: Smithsonian American Art Museum
Rosalind Bengelsdorf (Browne)
1916-1979

A student of Hans Hofmann, Rosalind Bengelsdorf was an artist, educator, critic and writer who championed abstract art in general and the American Abstract Artists in particular.

Central Nurses’ Residence Mural, Welfare Island (Roosevelt Island) 1938
Collection of the Public Design Commission of the City of New York

Still Life
Casein and tempera on paper
18 x 14”
1936
High Museum of Art
Gift of Mr. Stephen Browne
With her husband Charles Eames, Ray formed the *Eames Office*, whose notable contributions aided the development and popularity of Modernism in design and architecture from the 1940’s thru the 1980’s.
“Greene was one of the earliest American artists, possibly the first, to produce non-objective relief sculptures in the early 1930’s. She synthesized Cubist and Russian Constructivists themes into her work. By the 1940s, her work showed her interest in Mondrian and Neo-Plasticism.” Catherine S. Gaines, 2011; Balcomb and Gertrude Greene papers, circa 1880s-2009, bulk circa 1905-1990
Alice Trumbull Mason
1904 Litchfield, CT-1971 NYC
President 1959-1963

Emergent Form
Oil on board mounted on wooden strainer
27 15/16 x 23”
1945
Collection: Guggenheim Museum

Small Forms Serving Against Large
Oil on panel
26.2 x 26.2”
1949
Courtesy Washburn Gallery, NYC

Alice Trumbull Mason
AAA Thirtieth Anniversary Exhibition
Riverside Museum, NYC
Photo credit: John D. Schiff 1954
Jeanne Mercedes Carles Matter
1913 NYC-2001 East Hampton, NY
Founder of the New York Studio School

Untitled Tabletop Still Life
Oil on canvas board
12 x 16”
Ca.1935-36

Driftwood Herbert Matter 1940

Figure Study A
Charcoal on paper
14 x 16”
1966-68
Hans Hofmann
1880 Germany-1966 NYC

Though never a member, his influence as a teacher and mentor was instrumental in the creation of the American Abstract Artists. Among his students were early AAA members Lee (Lenore) Krasner, Louise Nevelson, Rosalind Bengelsdorf Browne, Nell Blaine, Ray Kaiser Eames, and Mercedes Matter.

Effervescence
oil, India ink, casein, and enamel on plywood panel
54.375” x 35.875”
1942
Collection: Berkeley Art Museum
“A number of the members were students of Hans Hofmann. Like the Hofmann School, the AAA had many gifted women members, once again proving that New York School prejudice against women began with the arrival of the Surrealists. The group was generally oriented toward the hard edge, non-objective styles rather than toward Hofmann’s expressionist abstractions from nature and the nude. Diverse as their abstract styles might be, AAA artists were united in their rejection of Regionalist styles of American Scene painters, which they considered illustration and not Fine Art. Because they were determined not to allow their art to become an instrument of political propaganda, they also opposed Socialist Realism on political, rather than esthetic grounds.”

Gertrude Greene as receptionist for AAA’s First Exhibition at the Squibb Gallery in 1937.
From “Abstract Artists Open Show Today”
*New York Times* April 6, 1937

critic, Alden Jewell, wrote

*Into the wide open spaces in the thirty-third floor of the Squibb Building, thirty-nine American “abstract artists” have ventured, each of them bring examples of his own special ingenuity, each arguing in some degree his endorsement as a raconteur of tales from over yonder on the Rive Gauche that have begun to assume, by this time, a sly patina of age. What they have put on display at the Squibb makes a colorful, an often resounding mass demonstration of decorative design.*

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From “Plenty of Duds Found in Abstract Art Show American Abstract Artists”
*New York Post* February 19, 1938

critic, Jerome Klein wrote

“...And what is the result? A series of light pops, a bit of sizzle here, fizzle there and plenty of duds.”

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*Pioneers of Abstract Art: American Abstract Artists, 1936-1996*  
Catalogue essay, pages 7-9  
Sandra Kraskin Director, Sidney Mishkin Gallery  
Baruch College/The City University of New York
The Riverside Museum hosted AAA Annual Exhibitions from 1939-1965

The Riverside Museum was located on the lower floors of 310 Riverside Drive at W103rd Street in the Master Apartments or the Master Building, a 27-story tower built by Louis Horch in 1928-29. The Riverside Museum opened in 1938 in the space previously occupied by the Nicholas Roerich Museum. As the Riverside Museum’s first director, Vernon C. Porter’s focus was to exhibit work by contemporary American artists. American Abstract Artists had its first annual membership exhibition at the Riverside Museum in 1939 with its final exhibition in 1965. Due to economic pressures, the Riverside Museum closed in 1971. In 1988 the Master Building was converted to a co-op, received Landmark status in 1989 and was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2016.
AAA Presidents

7 of the 18 Presidents were women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Balcomb Greene</td>
<td>1936-1941</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carl Holty</td>
<td>1937-1938</td>
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<tr>
<td>R. D. Turnbull</td>
<td>1940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ilya Bolotowsky</td>
<td>dates unclear</td>
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<tr>
<td>Charmion von Wiegand</td>
<td>1951, 1953</td>
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<tr>
<td>Henry Botkin</td>
<td>1952-1955</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alice Trumbull Mason</td>
<td>1959-1963</td>
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<tr>
<td>Esphyr Slobodkina</td>
<td>1963-1966</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leo Rabkin</td>
<td>1966-1978</td>
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<tr>
<td>Judith Rothschild</td>
<td>1978-1979</td>
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<tr>
<td>Irene Rousseau</td>
<td>1980-1981</td>
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<td>Merrill Wagner</td>
<td>1982-1985</td>
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<td>David Reed</td>
<td>1985-1986</td>
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<td>Beatrice Riese</td>
<td>1990-2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daniel G. Hill</td>
<td>2013-2018</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jim Osman</td>
<td>2019-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Charmion von Wiegand
1896 Chicago-1983 NYC
President 1951, 1953

Untitled
Oil on canvas
20 x 18”
1946

Gouache #100
Gouache and graphite
20 3/4 x 14 15/16”
1958
Davis Museum at Wellesley College
Alice Trumbull Mason’s letter to the membership of AAA on May 23, 1944, noted: “it has become apparent that, as public interest in abstract art has increased the members have shown less and less interest in furthering the aims for which the group was founded. This year indeed many, as far as the group is concerned, have ceased to function entirely.”

By 1947 14 of the original 39 members had resigned including Balcomb Greene resigned in 1942
Gertrude Greene resigned in 1942
Paul Kelpe was asked to resign because his space was too representational
John Opper resigned to make art that would lead to social reform

Catalogue essay, page 19
Sandra Kraskin Director, Sidney Mishkin Gallery
Baruch College/The City University of New York
The Art of This Century Gallery
1942-1947

Exhibition by 31 Women January-February 1943
AAA members that participated were

Suzy Frelinghuysen
Louise Nevelson
Irene Rice Pereira
Esphyr Slobodkina

“James Stern, art critic Time magazine, refused to review the exhibition on the basis that there had never been a first-rate woman artist and that women should stick to having babies” Kat Buckley, 2010*

*Sharp, J., “Serving the Future: The Exhibitions at Art of This Century 1942—1947” in Peggy Guggenheim & Frederick Kiesler: The Story of Art of This Century, ed. Susan Davidson and Philip Rylands (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2004), 292

The Women June-July 1945 featuring 33 women artists
AAA members that participated were

Nell Blaine
Louise Bourgeois
Lee Krasner
Charmion von Wiegand

Betty Parsons Gallery, which opened in 1946, would represent The Art of This Century Gallery artists after it closed in 1947.
Esphyr Slobodkina
1908 Russia-2002 Glen Head, NY
President 1963-1966

Crossroad #2
Oil on fiberboard
43.5 x 44.5”
1942-45
Smithsonian American Art Museum
Gift of Patricia and Phillip Frost

Caps for Sale
1938

The Derelict
Wood
39 x 30 x 8.5”
1938
©Slobodkina Foundation
Leo Rabkin
1919 Cincinnati - 2015 NYC
President 1966-1978

*Untitled*
Canvas and rope
30 x 35"
1958

*Wire: Stainless Copper*
Inkjet print
9.75x 12.75"
AAA 75th Anniversary Print Portfolio
2012
Collection: Metropolitan Museum of Art
Judith Rothschild
1921-1993 NYC
President 1978-1979

Grey Tangent
Oil on canvas
30 x 25"
1945
Collection: Metropolitan Museum of Art

Gothic Studies 6
Pieced paper and acrylic on foam board
1992
Collection: RISD Museum
Irene Rousseau
1941 NY-
President 1980-1981

Hyperbolic Blue
Venetian Glass on wood
23.5” in diameter
2003

Stretching the Space (blue background)
Oil on canvas
36 x 36 x 2”
2018
Merrill Wagner
1935 Seattle –
President 1982-1985

Untitled
3 x 6’
Acrylic on canvas
1967

Untitled
18.75 x 17.5”
Painted steel
2012

Untitled
18.75 x 17.5”
Painted steel
2012
David Reed
1946 San Diego
President 1985-1986

#432
oil and alkyd on solid ground
32 x 50"
1999-2006

#572-2
oil and alkyd on polyester
105 x 49"
2005-07/08-2010
Beatrice Riese
1917 The Hague-2004 NYC
President 1990-2003

Before Guttenberg
Oil and graphite on canvas
50 x 24"
1984
Collection: Princeton University Art Museum

Kufa
Ink on paper
31 x 22.25"
2003
Don Voisine
1952 Fort Kent, ME-
President 2004-2012

Drawing by Phong Bui

Your Idea
Oil on wood
24 x 20”
2010

Porter
Oil on wood
9 x 9”
2015
Courtesy of
MacKenzie Fine Arts
Daniel G. Hill
1956 Providence, R.I.-
President 2013-2018

Dishtowel Fold v.2
polyester cord, PVC rod, stainless steel
94.5 x 49 x 26”
2018
Jim Osman
1956 NYC-
President 2019-

Two Graces
Pigmented plaster, wood
72”x 24”x 30”
1990

Tete
Wood, paint
25”x 13” x 3”
2017
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SignificantFormerMembers of AmericanAbstractArtists</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Richard Anuszkiewicz</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jean Arp</td>
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<tr>
<td>Will Barnet</td>
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<td>Herbert Bayer</td>
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<td>Nell Blaine</td>
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<td>Mel Boucher</td>
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<td>Louise Bourgeois</td>
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<td>Stuart Davis</td>
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<td>Eleanor De Laittre</td>
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<td>José de Rivera</td>
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<td>David Diao</td>
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<td>Tom Doyle</td>
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<td>Lyonel Feininger</td>
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<td>Herbert Ferber</td>
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<td>Perle Fine</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suzy Frelinghuysen</td>
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<td>Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe</td>
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<td>Robert Goodnough</td>
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<td>Clement Greenberg</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marcia Hafif</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nancy Haynes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jean Helion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jene Highstein</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ward Jackson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gyorgy Kepes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lee Krasner</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fernand Léger</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Selected former female members

Louise Bourgeois
*La tapisserie de mon enfance, Mountains in Aubusson*
Brush and black ink and gouache on cream paper sheet
9 x 12”
1947

Corcoran Collection © The Easton Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, NY.

Eleanor De Laittre
*Untitled*
oil on linen mounted on fiber board
12 3/8 x 10 5/8”
1949
Collection: Smithsonian American Art Museum

Suzy Frelinghuysen
*Composition-Toreador Drinking*
oil on Masonite
51 1/8 x 35 1/8”
1944
Collection: Smithsonian Museum of Art
© Frelinghuysen Morris Foundation, Lenox, Massachusetts

Lee Krasner
*Night Creatures*
acrylic on paper
30 x 42.5”
1965
Collection: Metropolitan Museum of Art
© 2019 Artists Rights Society, New York
Selected former female members

Marcia Hafif
*Untitled*
acrylic spray on cardboard
22.38 x 18.88”
c.1968

Betty Parsons
*June #9*
oil on canvas
53.50 x 65.75
1971

Louise Nevelson
*Sky Cathedral*
painted wood
104 3/8 x 15 3/4”
1982
Collection: Smithsonian Museum of Art

Ruth Vollmer
*Walking Ball*
bronze
18 x 37”
1959
Courtesy Tilton Gallery, New York
Nell Blaine
*Peaks*
Oil on canvas
26 x 21”
1948

Ruth Eckstein
*Black Fields VI*
Oil and acrylic
30 x 40”
1980
Courtesy Childs Gallery, Boston

Nancy Haynes
*Untitled*
Oil on slate
23.5 x 23.5”
1986
Collection: Brooklyn Museum

Howardena Pindell
*Untitled #98*
Mixed media on board
10 x 9”
1978
Women of American Abstract Artists 2019

Front Row, left to right: Katinka Mann, Joanne Freeman, Karen Schifano, Melissa Staiger, Patricia Zarate
Middle Row, left to right: Lisa Nanni, Emily Berger, Judith Murray, Marthe Keller, Mary Schliro, Lynn Umlauf, Ce Roser
Back Row, left to right: Liz Ainslie, Claire Seidl, Anne Russinof, Kim Uchiyama, Jane Logemann, Gabriele Evertz, Nola Zirin, Laurie Fendrich

Not pictured: Alice Adams, Eve Ascheim, Siri Berg, Susan Bonfils, Naomi Boretz, Sharon Brant, Heidi Gluck, Gail Gregg, Lynne Harlow, Mara Held, Rhia Hurt, Phillis Ideal, Cecily Kahn, Iona Kleinhaut, Irene Lawrence, Nancy Manter, Joanne Mattera, Mary Obering, Raquel Rabinovich, Dorothea Rockburne, Lorenza Sannai, Susan Smith, Li Trincere, Clover Vail, Vera Vasek, Merrill Wagner, Jeanne Wilkinson
Blurring Boundaries:
The Women of American Abstract Artists

Curator: Rebecca DiGiovanna

The Ewing Gallery at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville
with support from Clara M. Eagle Gallery at Murray State University, Kentucky
Touring through the International Arts and Artists, Washington, D.C.