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The New York Times

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Alice Trumbull Mason: America's Forgotten Modernist

The first monograph of a painter's painter brings a jolt of new insight and a confident show of her works' mindfulness and beauty.

By Roberta Smith, April 30, 2020

Alice Trumbull Mason, a painter who never got her due, turned to abstraction at 25, in 1929, when its American adherents were few and it was viewed as a foreign, even Communist element. She was inspired by the art of Wassily Kandinsky and by Arshile Gorky, one of Abstract Expressionism's founders, with whom she studied. Her belief that abstraction was, in her words, "the true realism" never wavered — nor did she ever run out of ideas over her 40-year career.

The forms on her small canvases mutated with unusual variety and momentum between the biomorphic and geometric (the latter ultimately won out). In other words, the initial influence of Kandinsky (and also Joan Miró) gave way to that of Piet Mondrian, on whose legacy she built with an originality that few other American painters have equaled.

Her stylistic range is radiantly apparent in "Alice Trumbull Mason: A Pioneer of Abstraction," a show of 16 paintings from 1929 to 1969 at the Washburn Gallery, which has represented the artist's estate since 1973, two years after her death at 67. The works, seen in an online display, reflect a mind on the move. Compositions feature squares or polygons; are arranged on the diagonal or perpendicular; involve flat or tilted planes.

The exhibition also celebrates the May 26 publication of a similarly-titled book, "Alice Trumbull Mason: Pioneer of American Abstraction," that is, astoundingly, the first monograph on Mason — nearly a half-century after her death. Its 160 full-page color reproductions represent about three-fourths of her work and expand lavishly upon the confident development encapsulated at Washburn.

The book fulfills a longtime goal of the artist's daughter, Emily Mason, a New York abstract painter who worked closely with Rizzoli on it but died in December before its completion. Its numerous reproductions suggest a pent-up frustration, a determination to make up for lost time. The daughter clearly intended to eliminate doubt about her mother's achievement, and to pay tribute, she wrote, to "the perseverance of her inner core." Mission accomplished. With essays on the artist's paintings, prints, poetry and letters, this volume gives the fullest chronology yet of Mason's life and work, and reveals tantalizing possibilities for future research.



Alice Trumbull Mason in 1946. She was a true independent whose careful, balanced abstractions are just being appreciated. Alice Trumbull Mason, the Archives American Art, and Washburn Gallery; Charlie Horowitz

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Mason has long been a painter's painter, known mainly to a small number of artists and collectors. The extent of her reputation is measured by the fate of the artist's "Forms Evoked," a 1940 painting that was auctioned at Christie's in 2018. The estimate was \$4,000 to \$6,000; the hammer price was \$106,250.

"Two Mason fans slugging it out," remarked Joan Washburn, the 90-year-old doyenne of American art dealers, who relocated her gallery, which opened in 1971, from 57th Street to Chelsea nearly three years ago, arguably the oldest art dealer to ever do so.

Ms. Washburn began to represent Mason's estate at the behest of Emily's husband, the painter Wolf Kahn, who shortly after his mother-in-law's death carried several of her small abstractions over to the art dealer's apartment, set them out on the mantle and let them percolate for several days.

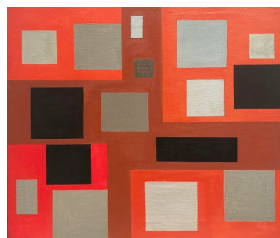
As Ms. Washburn remembers, "I was smitten." Mason's work is not something you absorb in a flash. Its integrity, "mindfulness" and assured beauty emerge slowly, in careful compositions, color choices, delicate but tactile brushwork, and inevitable balance. These constants and their emotional force form Mason's "core," and deflect any complaints that she changed styles too often.



"Spring" (1931), a joyful painting from "Alice Trumbull Mason: A Pioneer of Abstraction." Alice Trumbull Mason/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; via Washburn Gallery

An inherent self-sufficiency was present from the beginning. One of her earliest paintings, "Spring" (1931), is a joyful canvas where lavender, pink, pale chartreuse and notional marks of red and black intimate growth and change. Despite its debts to the European modernists and the American Arthur Dove, "Spring" could hold its own even in the Museum of Modern Art, which has three prints but, so far, no Mason canvas.

Works from the late 1960s are some of Mason's best, dominated by perpendicular blocks of color. From 1969, the last year Mason painted, "#1 Towards a Paradox" features an irregular dark red cross on a brighter red background, punctuated with near-squares and rectangles in black, gray and mouse-brown. These elements pulsate at slightly different depths, echoing the synergy of Mondrian's "Broadway Boogie Woogie," but bolder.



Alice Trumbull Mason, "#1 Towards a Paradox" (1969), oil on canvas, echoes the synergy of Mondrian. Alice Trumbull Mason/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; via Washburn Gallery

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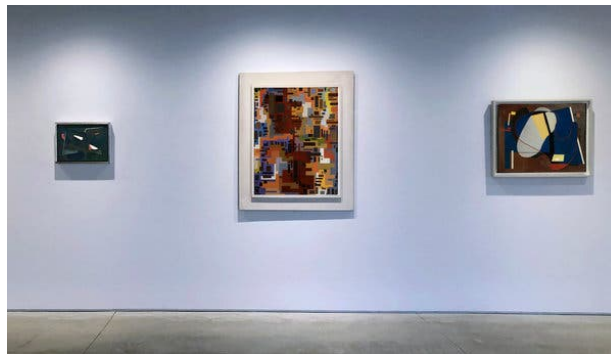
Mason's "Paradox #10 Chiaroscuro" (1968) is a geometric landscape. Alice Trumbull Mason/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; via Washburn Gallery

"Paradox #10 Chiaroscuro" (1968) is a geometric landscape, with clusters of bars buried below and floating above a stark horizon on which sit four mismatched squares. It looks a little like the parts of a painting by Peter Halley, waiting to be assembled. Both of these works belong to a series started in 1950, predicting Minimalism.

During her lifetime, Mason sold around 10 paintings, had only six solo shows in New York, never had gallery representation and saw her paintings acquired by only three museums. (One of the Guggenheim's founders, Hilla Rebay, was the first, purchasing two canvases in the mid-1940s.) But Mason's intimate, considered style of abstraction was shunted aside by Abstract Expressionism and overshadowed by Minimalism.

By the early 1960s Mason was herself fading, becoming more and more reclusive, mourning the drowning of her son, Jonathan, at sea in 1957, and drinking more. There were, however, signs of new attention: One of her last solo shows occurred at the Hansa gallery in 1959, organized by its young director, Richard Bellamy, who included Mason in two group shows at his cutting-edge Green Gallery in the 1960s.

Mason was born Alice Bradford Trumbull in Litchfield, Conn., in 1904 into a well-off family of old New England stock. Her father's ancestors included the Revolutionary-era painter John Trumbull; her mother was descended from William Bradford, a governor of the Plymouth colony in the late 17th century. Mason was the fifth of six children and evidently willful. An older sister later remarked, "What Alice wanted to do, you know that the family did it."



From left, "White Appearing" (1942); "L'Hasard" (1948-49); and "Oil on Composition" (1942). Alice Trumbull Mason/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; via Washburn Gallery

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Her interest in art began early, and during her teenage years, when the family lived in Italy for a while, she studied painting in Rome. In 1930 she married Warwood Mason, a sea captain, and had a daughter and a son. With her husband often away, she was a single mother for long periods, during which time she stopped painting, writing poetry instead. She sent her work to William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein, both of whom encouraged her to publish.

In 1935, she co-founded the American Abstract Artists group, which started staging annual exhibitions and picketed the Museum of Modern Art for not showing abstraction by American artists. She began an affair with the sculptor Ibram Lassaw that extended from the late 1930s into the early 1940s, when the Masons began to live together year-round for the first time, but their friendship lasted the rest of her life.

Mason is one of several American painters — including Ilya Bolotowsky, Burgoyne Diller and Fritz Glarner — called Mondrianistes, for their devotion to Mondrian. But only Mason made his ideas her own: her grids were always implied and her colors rarely pure. The effervescent “L’Hasard” of 1948-49, one of her earliest great paintings, reiterates Mondrian’s color squares in black and scatters them across larger shapes of lavender, brown, orange and white, creating a kind of allover randomness at odds with the Dutch master’s airy, orderly scaffolding and his primary colors.

Beginning in the 1950s, Mason’s understated geometric abstraction found good company, in the work of Myron Stout, Anne Ryan, Agnes Martin and John McLaughlin. With them, she also set a precedent for young artists like Tomma Abts, Thomas Nozkowski, Ann Pibal and Bill Jensen.

The reasons for the neglect of Mason’s art surely include her gender and the fact that she was an instinctive independent, out of step with the prevailing style, Abstract Expressionism. This exhibition reminds us how early she found her voice, while the belated book reveals her adamant pursuit of its implications. Both should prompt at least one good-size museum to give Mason’s achievement the institutional attention it deserves.

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