

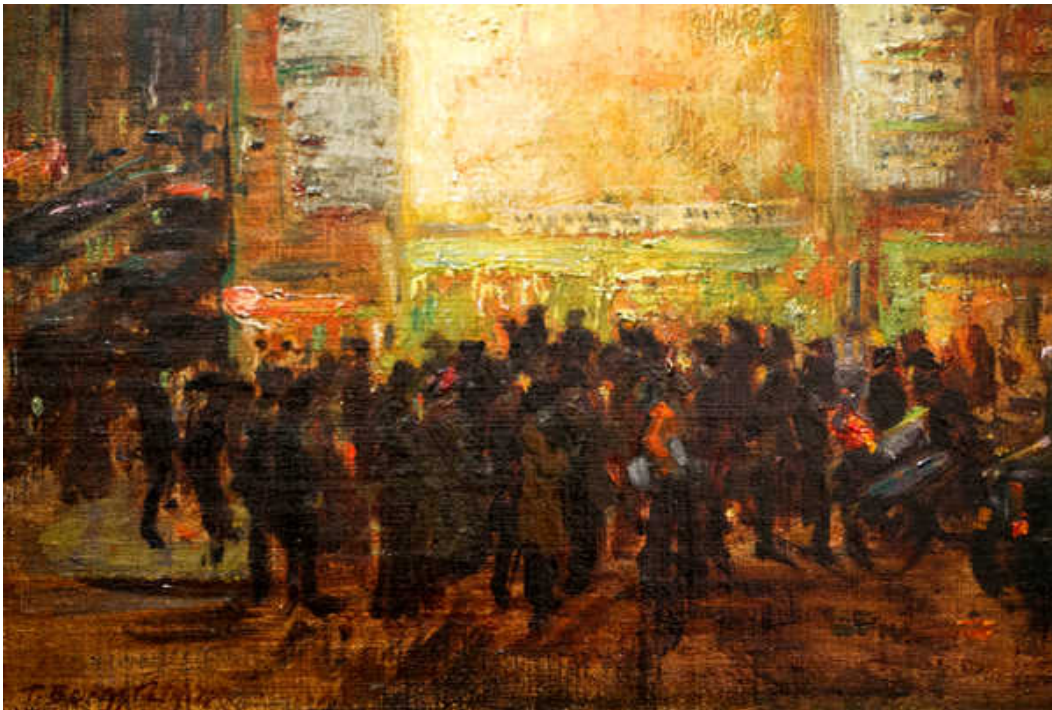
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A Long Life Lived in the Shadow of Others

A Theresa Bernstein Retrospective in Philadelphia

By KEN JOHNSON AUG. 28, 2014



"Theresa Bernstein: A Century in Art" features a detail from "Reading the War News" (1915). Jessica Kourkounis for The New York Times

PHILADELPHIA — Since the publication of Linda Nochlin's groundbreaking 1971 essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," feminist art historians have worked hard to rescue forgotten female figures from oblivion. One interesting candidate for recovery is offered by a traveling exhibition now at the Woodmere Art Museum here. "Theresa Bernstein: A Century in Art" presents more than 50

paintings dating from 1912 to 1972. It's the first retrospective ever dedicated to Ms. Bernstein (1890-2002), who came of age during the heyday of early-20th-century American realism.

Born in Krakow, Poland, Ms. Bernstein came to the United States as a child. She grew up in comfortable circumstances in Philadelphia with parents who generously supported her artistic ambitions. She studied art at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women (now Moore College of Art & Design) and at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. In her early 20s, she moved to New York with her parents and threw herself into the art scene there, exhibiting in many group shows along with Robert Henri, John Sloan, Edward Hopper and others associated with various realist currents.



The teens and early '20s were her most productive and promising years, but though she won prizes and was often positively mentioned in reviews, she never broke into the male-dominated big leagues. Still, she kept on painting for the next eight decades, not stopping until two years before her death, just shy of her 112th birthday. In longevity, she had few rivals.

Organized, with the help of several graduate students, by Gail Levin, a professor of art history, American studies and women's studies at Baruch College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, the show naturally invites the question of whether Ms. Bernstein deserves promotion to the higher ranks of 20th-century American painters. Ms. Levin thinks she does. In "Forgotten Fame: Inscribing Theresa Bernstein into History," her essay in the book that accompanies the show, she argues that Ms. Bernstein has been overlooked simply because she was a woman.

Ms. Levin takes it for granted that Ms. Bernstein was a great artist, but the exhibition doesn't support that conviction. At her best, Ms. Bernstein was a pretty good painter, and there are some fine things here. Especially in some of her early works, she had a sensuous, painterly touch and a compelling way with light.

One of the most arresting, and, at 54 by 60 inches, the show's biggest canvas, is "Carnegie Hall With Paderewski" (1914), in which we see from behind the dark figures of a half-dozen raptly listening people, silhouetted against the incandescent glow of a distant stage. "The Suffrage Meeting," from the same year, does something similar with the head of an orator rising above a shadowy outdoor crowd silhouetted against golden city lights beyond.

"Woman With a Parrot" (1917), a suave study of a woman in a slinky dress holding up a bird on one wrist, might have been inspired by Manet's portrait of a woman and her parrot, "Young Lady in 1866," which Ms. Bernstein probably would have known from visits to the Metropolitan Museum of Art



"Crow Village" (1920). Credit Jessica Kourkounis for The New York Times

"Girlhood" (1921), which is in the Phillips Collection in Washington, is an exquisitely sensitive, Cézanne-esque portrait of a pensive seated young woman with a couple of symbolically suggestive peaches on the table before her.

But for every excellent piece in the show, there are numerous nondescript ones, like "Flags of the Allies" (1918), a muddily impressionistic picture of flag-waving crowds lining a New York street. In "The Milliners" (1918), a group of women making hats is rendered in a heavy-handed, Social Realist manner. Worst of all is "Allies of World War I" (1917), which represents a frieze of stock allegorical figures. It looks like a study for something big by an unskilled and unimaginative muralist.

Because of Ms. Bernstein's tendency to change styles, there are hits and misses. Painted as if by a tag team of van Gogh and Soutine, the domestic outdoor scene pictured in "Baby Carriages Laundry Day, Park Slope Brooklyn" (circa 1923) takes on a nearly visionary wildness. On the other hand, two gaudy, semi-abstract pictures inspired by jazz, one from 1927 and the other from 1935, are remarkable mainly for anticipating the kitschy illustration of LeRoy Neiman. There are only four paintings from between the '40s and 1972 — three sketchily impressionistic still lifes and another jazz painting — and they are inconsequential.

One of the exhibition's most peculiar works, "Summer Picnic" (1919), depicts the artist herself, sitting outdoors among trees in a voluminous white robe that's falling off her naked shoulder and a bare-chested

man holding an apple. A saccharine yet loving fusion of Cézanne and Renoir, this pastoral idyll celebrates Ms. Bernstein's marriage to the painter and printmaker William Meyerowitz.

Ms. Bernstein and Mr. Meyerowitz stayed married for more than 60 years, until his death in 1981. By all accounts, it was a happy, mutually supportive marriage. But in her essay, Ms. Levin introduces the impending nuptials of 1919 with this curiously ominous sentence: "Yet Bernstein's precocious fame and dynamic career were about to suffer." Ms. Levin thinks that the reason Ms. Bernstein didn't get her due, besides the prevailing attitudes of the art world, is that she subordinated her own career to her husband's.

Ms. Levin's argument would have a lot more force if the exhibition demonstrated a coherent and original artistic vision. A more judicious selection of works would help. As it is, the show gives no reason to believe that Ms. Bernstein was one of the great American artists of the 20th century. That's not a terrible thing. Most artists, male and female, will be forgotten by all but friends and family. That's just how it goes.

"Theresa Bernstein: A Century in Art" runs through Oct. 26 at the Woodmere Art Museum, 9201 Germantown Avenue, Philadelphia; 215-247-0476, woodmereartmuseum.org.