

Women Artists: VAC Members Choose Their Favorites

By Kathy McShane

In celebration of Women's History Month, our Visual Arts Club members were invited to name their favorite woman artist. I received some great responses. Here's a little bit about each one.

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653) was an Italian Baroque painter, one of a few female painters to achieve renown when she was alive and now regarded as one of the most expressive and progressive painters of her time. Her recounting of her rape by artist Agostino Tassi, which she stuck to despite torture, threatened to overshadow her artistic career. Nevertheless, she managed not only to be one of few women to achieve fame during her own era, but to become regarded as one of the finest artists of her generation. Gentileschi is the subject of a biographical novel, *The Passion of Artemisia* by Susan Vreeland (2002), the subject of the 1997 film *Artemisia* and of a 2020 documentary, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Warrior Painter*. She is also the subject of the 1999 historical novel *Artemisia* by Alexandra Lapierre. Described as heavily researched and racy, Lapierre's novel details the story of Artemisia's rape, torture, trial and ultimate vindication, the subsequent loss of her father's love as well as that of all of Rome and her revenge through her art.

Perhaps one of Gentileschi's most famous paintings, *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (ca. 1613–14), shown below, literally depicts the Old Testament figure Judith slaying an Assyrian ruler who had attacked Jewish peoples, has also been interpreted as a way for Gentileschi to avenge her rape by Tassi.



Another of Gentileschi's well-known paintings is her self-portrait in which she depicts herself painting.



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting (La Pittura)*, ca. 1638–39.

American artist, **Mary Cassatt** (1844-1926), spent most of her adult life in France, where she was invited by Edgar Degas to join the independent artists later known as the Impressionists. *I Always Loved You*, by Robin Oliveira (2014), is a novel of the great romance of Cassatt and Degas, with a secondary story about the love affair between Berthe Morisot and Édouard Manet (Morisot was married to Manet's brother).

Cassatt's first impressionist painting is often considered to be *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair* (1878).



Mary Cassatt, *Little Girl in A Blue Armchair*, 1878.

Cassatt often created images of the social and private lives of women, with particular emphasis on the intimate bonds between mothers and children. One of the most celebrated is *The Child's Bath* (1893), influenced by her study of Japanese art.



Mary Cassatt, *The Child's Bath*, 1893.

Mirrors were a common device in Cassatt's work. In *Woman with a Sunflower*, there are two mirrors. The small handheld mirror effectively acts as the medium of communication between mother and child. As for the large sunflower on the mother's dress, the sunflower had become the official symbol of the National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1896. Cassatt herself was a fierce advocate for women's rights.



Mary Cassatt, *Woman with a Sunflower*, 1905.

Grandma (Anne Marie Robertson) Moses (1860-1961) is an icon of American folk art, often depicting scenes of everyday life in America. She did not start painting in earnest until the age of 78; she lived to be 101. Moses entertained herself and her friends by making needlework pictures and quilts portraying colorful scenes of farm life. It was only when arthritis rendered her unable to embroider that she began painting these scenes instead. Self-taught, Moses worked with whatever materials were at hand, using house paint and leftover canvas or fireboard for her first paintings. Although she had first-hand experience of the hardships and sorrows of farm life, her paintings are largely of happy, nostalgic scenes. Hallmark purchased the rights to reproduce her paintings on greeting cards. Grandma Moses painted over 1,500 images, of which three are shown below.



Grandma Moses, *Catching the Thanksgiving Turkey*, 1943.



Grandma Moses, *A Country Wedding*, 1951.



Grandma Moses, *Calhoun*, 1955.

Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) is one of the most significant artists of the 20th century. As early as the 1920's O'Keeffe was recognized as one of the most important and successful American artists, known for her paintings of skyscrapers and enlarged flowers. She first visited New Mexico in 1929, whose landscape and culture inspired a new direction in her art. In 2014, O'Keeffe's 1932 painting *Jimson Weed/White Flower No. 1* sold for over \$44 million, more than three times the previous world auction record for any female artist. After her death, the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum was established in Santa Fe. The museum's collection has close to 150 of O'Keeffe's paintings as well as hundreds of works on paper. O'Keeffe and her husband, the photographer, Alfred Stieglitz, were the subjects of the 2009 biographical drama TV show, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, which received numerous Emmy nominations in 2010. The historical novel, *Georgia*, by Dawn Tripp (2016) brings to life Georgia O'Keeffe, her love affair with photographer Alfred Stieglitz, and her quest to become an independent artist.



Georgia O'Keeffe, *Red Canna*, 1924.



Georgia O'Keeffe, *Ram's Head White Hollyhock and Little Hills*, 1935.



Georgia O'Keeffe, *Jimson Weed, White Flower No. 1*, 1932.

With a career spanning eight decades from the 1930s until 2010, The French-American artist, **Louise Bourgeois** (1911-2010), is one of the great figures of modern and contemporary art. She is best known for her large-scale sculptures and installations inspired by her memories and experiences.

Inspired by the Surrealists, in the early 1940's after emigrating from France to the US, Bourgeois created a series of totemic sculptures that evoke the human form and were referred to as Personages. The artist explained that the sculptures were a way of recreating all the people she had left behind. In this early piece (1941) shown below, entitled *Quarantania*, the figures not only represent a family of human figures, but also represent shuttles, one of the tools that Bourgeois' parents used when they restored tapestries at their family-owned business.



Louise Bourgeois, *Quarantania*, 1941.

Bourgeois started crafting her iconic spider sculptures late in her career. Her 30-foot-tall spider statue, *Maman (Ama)*, 1999, includes a sac containing 32 marble eggs and its abdomen and thorax are made of ribbed bronze. According to Bourgeois, “The Spider is an ode to my mother. She was my best friend. Like a spider, my mother was a weaver. My family was in the business of tapestry restoration, and my mother was in charge of the workshop. Like spiders, my mother was very clever. Spiders are friendly presences that eat mosquitoes. We know that mosquitoes spread diseases and are therefore unwanted. So, spiders are helpful and protective, just like my mother.”



Louise Bourgeois, *Maman*, 1999.

The American artist, **Helen Frankenthaler** (1928-2011), had an artistic career spanning six decades. She is widely credited with having a key role in the transition from Abstract Expressionism to Color Field painting.

Frankenthaler invented the "soak-stain" technique, in which she poured turpentine-thinned paint onto unprimed canvas, producing luminous color washes that appeared to merge with the canvas. Her breakthrough painting using this technique was her 1952 *Mountains and Sea*. She was only 23 at the time. The work was initially panned by critics; it was to become her best-known canvas. The work is a precursor to color field painting.



Helen Frankenthaler, *Mountains and Seas*, 1952.

Color Field painting is a term that was coined by the art critic Clement Greenberg to describe the works of Abstract Expressionist painters who composed paintings with broad expanses of saturated color. Below are two of Frankenthaler's works which fall under the rubric of Color Field painting.



Helen Frankenthaler, *Riverhead*, 1963.



Helen Frankenthaler, *Ocean Drive West #1*, 1974.

Alice Neel (1900-1984) was an American painter known for her Expressionistic and daringly honest portraits of friends, family and lovers. She is widely regarded as one of the foremost American figurative artists of the 20th century. She called herself “a collector of souls”. In 2021, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC, presented her solo retrospective exhibition, *Alice Neel: People Come First*.

Neel led a troubled life. Her first child died of diphtheria just before her first birthday. Another daughter was lost to her estranged husband’s family in Cuba two years later. That daughter later committed suicide. As a single mother, she raised two sons in Spanish Harlem while on welfare. Neel herself attempted suicide twice, once by eating glass. For most of her life, she was a neglected artist, achieving acclaim only towards the end of her life. In 2007, Neel’s filmmaker grandson, Andrew Neel, directed a documentary of his grandmother’s life and work, which explores Neel’s struggles the artist had as a single mother, a female artist, and a non-conformist.



Alice Neel, *Black Spanish-American Family*, 1950



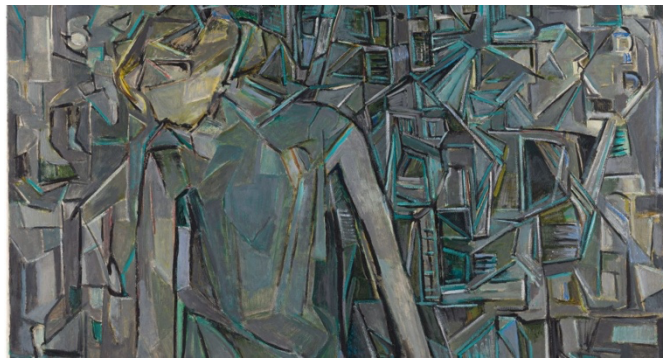
Alice Neel, *Andy Warhol*, 1970.

In 1980, four years before her death at age 84, Neel painted her first and only self-portrait, a nude. Though her body appears physically fragile, her gaze is formidable. The VAC member who nominated Neel said that the artist's self-portrait inspired her to paint her own self-portrait at age 90 (although not in the nude).



Alice Neel, *Self-Portrait*, 1980.

Joan Mitchell (1925-1992) was an American Abstract Impressionist artist, one of the few women of her era to obtain critical and public acclaim for her work. She was known for what have been called “epic” large scale abstractions that feature bold color palettes. Her brush strokes hint at the source material, and draw on landscape, memory, poetry, and music. Prior to 1950, Mitchell was painting in a semi-figurative style; in 1950 she finished the last human figure she would ever paint (*Figure and the City*). The artist saw visual pleasure as a priority. In an interview with an art critic, Mitchell said, “I am not a member of the make-it ugly school”. Not only was Mitchell an outstanding visual artist, she was also an athlete, and a champion figure skater. Only this year, Mitchell’s work has been in the news. The Joan Mitchell Foundation rejected requests from Louis Vuitton to use her artworks in their handbag ads. Vuitton used them anyway, using photographs taken at the Fondation Louis Vuitton where some of Mitchell’s works were on display.



Joan Mitchell, *Figure and the City*, 1949-1950.



Joan Mitchell, *To the Harbormaster*, 1957.

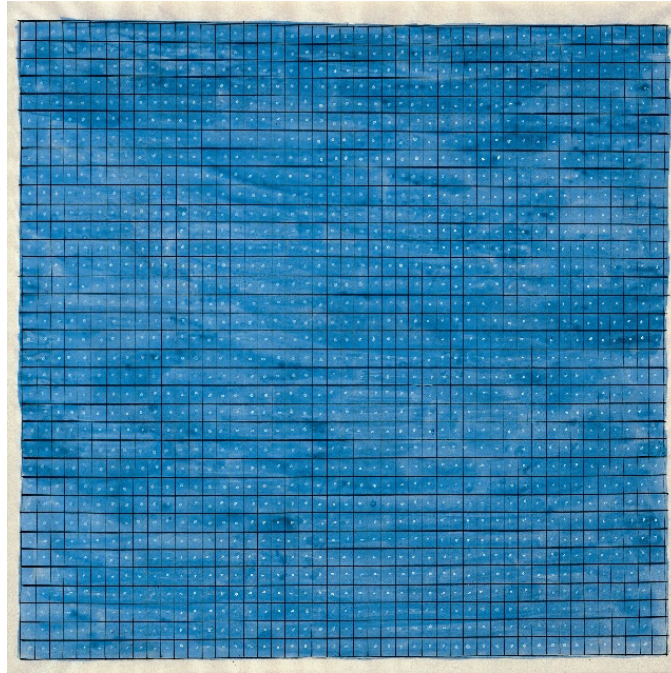


Joan Mitchell, *No Rain*, 1976.

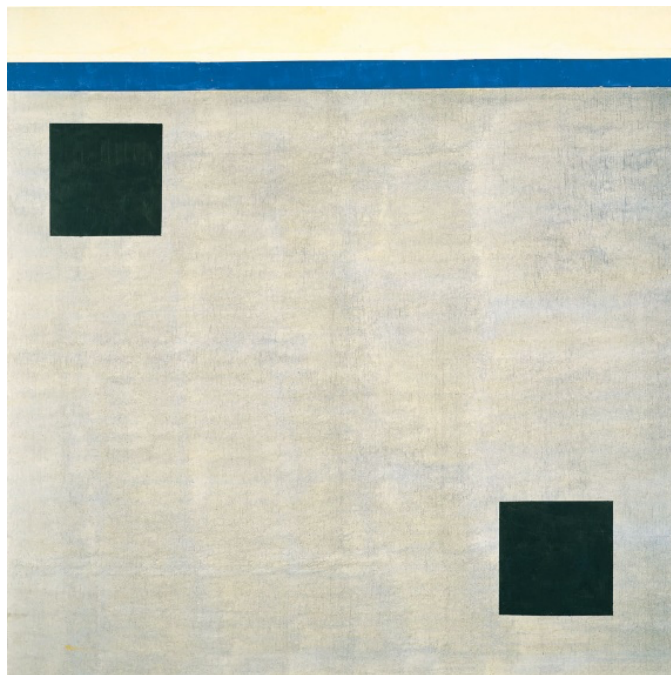
Agnes Martin (1912-2004) was an American abstract painter. Although sometimes described as a “minimalist”, Martin thought of herself as an abstract painter. Her work reflects her rural Canadian roots as well as her life in New Mexico. She also drew upon Zen Buddhism and American Transcendentalism ideas in her art. Her signature format became her six by six-foot painted canvases, covered from edge to edge with meticulously penciled grids and finished with a thin layer of gesso. At the height of her career, she abandoned painting for a period, having suffered the loss of her home and a close friend and the strain of mental illness. When she ultimately returned to painting, her style had shifted from the meticulous grids to bolder geometric schemes, reminiscent of her earliest work.



Agnes Martin, *Harbor Number 1*, 1957.



Agnes Martin, *Summer*, 1964.



Agnes Martin, *Untitled*, 2004.

P. Buckley Moss (1933-present) is an American artist best known for her “Valley Style” watercolors of the Amish and Mennonites and landscapes. Growing up during a time when little was known about dyslexia, Moss used drawing as a means of escape and a method of communication. She began incorporating the Amish and Mennonites into her art after she and her husband moved to the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia. Those works reflect the artist’s admiration of their faith, dedication to family and care of the land. Donations of her artwork have helped raise over \$4 million for charitable causes. Moss has also formed a foundation for the education of children with learning differences. Although some have said that Moss is an example of triumph over dyslexia, Moss believes she has been successful at what she does because of it.



P. Buckley Moss, *Cottage Wall*, 1987



P. Buckley Moss, *Quilting with My Girls*, 1994.



P. Buckley Moss, *Farm in Xenia, Ohio*, 2010.

Sheila Hicks (1934-present) is an American textile artist, known for her innovative and experimental weavings and fiber sculptures. Her extensive travel and her exploration of weaving cultures world-wide have helped define her work. According to Hicks, "Textile is a universal language." Her works of art range from small woven pieces she calls *Minimes* to sculptural fiber piles to monumental installations.

Hicks's *Minimes* are miniature weavings made on a wooden loom and which incorporate a wide range of items, such as rubber bands, shells, shoelaces, and pieces of rock.



Sheila Hicks, *Mauresque Etiquette*, 2013.

Among her "sculptural piles" is *The Evolving Tapestry: He/She* (1967), comprised of hundreds of bound and stacked "ponytail" units. Each time this work is exhibited, it assumes a different form.



Among Hicks's larger scale projects is her 2016/2017 *Escalade Beyond Chromatic Lands*, shown below. Consisting of a mountain of colorful fiber bales, *Escalade* entices the viewer to interact with it, which, unfortunately, is prohibited.



Tara Donovan (1969-present) is an American artist who uses everyday objects and transforms them into sculptures and installations. She exploits the inherent properties of these various objects to create works of art that suggest real and artificial world phenomena. Donovan's works incorporate such ordinary items as paper plates, plastic cups, scotch tape, buttons, pins, pencils, and toothpicks.

Donovan's *Colony* (2002) consists of hundreds of pencils of varying lengths, giving the appearance of a cityscape.



Haze (2003) is composed entirely of seven-inch plastic straws.



Strata (2002) is a floor installation made of pooled and layered pieces of dried Elmer's Glue.

Mary Whyte (1953-present) is an American artist best known for her representational watercolor portraits. The late Pat Conroy said that Whyte “could easily be named the first visual poet laureate of South Carolina... She is painting a South Carolina I thought only a poet or novelist could create. Mary Whyte has made South Carolina a kingdom of her own, and my God, this woman can write and paint.” Whyte has written seven published books, among them *Down Bohicket Road* (2012). The book includes two decades' worth of Whyte's watercolors depicting a group of Gullah women of Johns Island, along with their stories. Her book *Working South* (2011) captures in exquisite detail the essence of vanishing blue-collar professions from across ten states in the American South with sensitivity and reverence for her subjects. Whyte's 2019 book, *We the People: Portraits of Veterans in America*, reflects the culmination of seven-year project painting fifty large scale portraits of everyday veterans, one from each state. Below are three of Whyte's paintings, one from each of these three books.





Finally, one of our VAC members nominated an art teacher she had for almost a decade, Christy Gallagher. Gallagher used to paint almost exclusively in oils until the art center in Connecticut where she was teaching asked her to design a watercolor course. After that, Gallagher said, she became her own star pupil. She says she draws inspiration from the light in Bridgeport, as the painting below demonstrates.



Gallagher's attraction to neighborhood scenes is evident in this painting.



The artist's expertise also extends to still life paintings, of which her 2021 *White Robe on Chair* is an example.

