

# WOMEN'S CAUCUS FOR ART HONOR AWARDS

Berenice Abbott

Elsie Driggs

Elizabeth Gilmore Holt

Katharine Kuh

Charmion von Wiegand

Claire Zeisler

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# Preface

As the Women's Caucus for Art, an organization that began in 1972 with a membership of 200 and has grown in 1982 to a membership of over 3,000, completes its first decade and conducts its fourth Honor Awards Ceremony, it is preserving a tradition and a continuum of spiritual values. For this tradition to continue unbroken "we need concrete artifacts, the works of hands, written words to read, images to look at, a dialogue with brave and imaginative women who came before us" (Adrienne Rich).

It is these brave and imaginative women that we are celebrating today. It is their spiritual values, the works of their hands, their written words, and their images that we are, again, claiming as our inspiration. In doing so we are reconstructing our past, appraising our present, and creating our future.

In her speech of accession to the French Academy in January, 1981, the distinguished author Marguerite Yourcenar spoke of herself as being "accompanied by an invisible troupe of women who perhaps she has received this honor long before." She added that she was "tempted to stand aside to let their shadows pass." She was the first woman to have been made a member of the Academy in 346 years.

We are here today to invite living presences to join our Academy of distinguished women so that there will be no need for the women of the future to stand aside to let shadows of invisible women pass. We want in our future endeavours to be accompanied by living visions.

1979: Georgia O'Keeffe, Isabel Bishop, Selma Burke, Alice Neel, Louise Nevelson; 1980: Annie Albert, Louise Bourgeois, Caroline Durieux, Ida Kohlmeyer, Lee Krasner; 1981: Ruth Bernhard, Adelyn Doherty Breeskin, Elizabeth Catlett, Sari Dienes, Claire Falkenstein, Helen Lundberg; names we will never forget, for they belong to the sixteen courageous and creative pioneers whom we have honored and whom we look as sources of inspiration.

To this roster of women of distinction we add this year Berenice Abbott, Elsie Driggs, Elizabeth Gilmore Holt, Katharine Kuh, Charmion von Wiegand, and Claire Zeisler. Between them they encompass almost all fields in the visual arts: photography, painting, collage, sculpture, work in fiber art history and museology. They have given us spiritual values, works of their hands, written words and images. They prove what many of us have known, but others have ignored, that women are capable of telling their own truth.

S. DeRenne Coerr  
President, Women's Caucus for Art

Thalia Gouma-Peterson  
Chair, Honor Awards Selection Committee

# **A Lifetime of Art: Six Women of Distinction**

## **Women's Caucus For Art Honor Awards Exhibition**

New York Cultural Center  
2 Columbus Circle  
New York City  
February 22 - March 5, 1982

Catalogue edited by **THALIA GOUMA-PETERSON**  
Curator: **ANNIE SHAVER-CRANDELL**  
Coordinator: **CYNTHIA NAVARETTA**

### **Honor Awards Selection Committee**

**THALIA GOUMA-PETERSON**, Chair, Art Historian, The College of Wooster, Wooster, Ohio.  
**PRISCILLA BIRGE**, Artist, Berkeley, California.  
**ANNIE SHAVER-CRANDELL**, Art Historian, the City College of New York, New York.  
**ALISON HILTON**, Art Historian, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan.  
**ORA LERMAN**, Artist, State University of New York at Suffolk, New York.  
**CYNTHIA NAVARETTA**, Author and Editor *Women Artists News*, New York.  
**CHRIS PETTEYS**, Art Historian, Sterling, Colorado.  
**JOSEPHINE WITHERS**, Art Historian, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland.

# The Women's Caucus for Art 4th Honor Awards Ceremony For Ourstanding Achievement in the Visual Arts

## Program

February 25, 1982, 5:00 p.m.

New York Cultural Center, 2 Columbus Circle, New York City

Greetings: **S. DeRenne Coerr**, President, Woman's Caucus for Art

Introduction: **Thalia Gouma-Peterson**, Chair, Honor Awards Selection Committee

Presentation of Awards:

**BERENICE ABBOT** - Paula Gerson

**ELSIE DRIGGS** - Ora Lerman

**ELIZABETH GILMORE HOLT** - Josephine Withers

**KATHARINE KUH** - Cynthia Navaretta

**CHARMION VON WIEGAND** - Virginia Pitts Rembert

**CLAIRE ZEISLER** - Alison Hilton

# Berenice Abbott

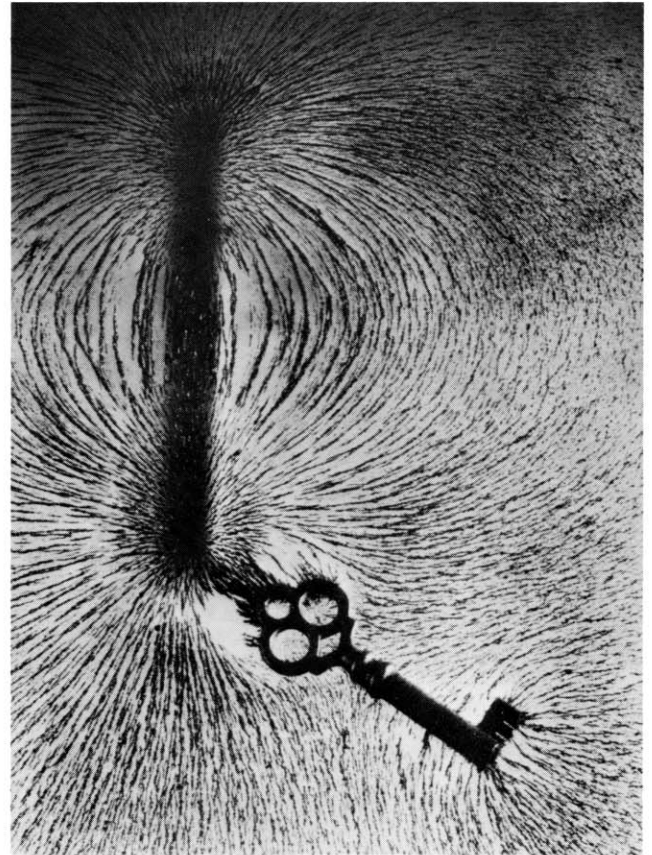
Berenice Abbott, we honor you today for your contribution to photography and to art. Having chosen to work with the large and majestic elements of our world, you have revealed that which is vital and enduring about the times and places in which we live.

Berenice Abbott's work has been characterized by her penetrating intelligence, her concern with large concepts, and her preoccupation with truth — the truth of reality, and truth to the photographic medium.

Abbott left her native Ohio in 1918 and studied sculpture in New York, and in 1921 left New York for Europe. Her introduction to photography came in 1923 when she took a job as an assistant to Man Ray, and by 1926 she had opened her own portrait studio in Paris. From this period come her extraordinarily revealing portraits of James Joyce, Andre Gide, Peggy Guggenheim, Jean Cocteau and other notables of the Parisian art and literary world. It was also during this period that Abbott met the photographer Eugene Atget, whose work she not only championed, but rescued from oblivion and preserved for posterity.

Returning to New York in 1929, Abbott found herself captivated by the energy and vitality of the city. Although her subject matter suddenly changed from portraiture to a documentary recording of the dramatic changes in New York City, her underlying approach remained the same, "to reach the roots, to get under the skin of reality." By 1935 she was appointed supervisor of the WPA Federal Art Project assigned to document New York City. To this project she brought a knowing and searching eye, and a wonderful sense for the multitude of dichotomies which constituted New York during the Great Depression. This work culminated in 1939 with *Changing New York*, a book with photographs by Abbott and text by the critic Elizabeth McCausland.

Although best known for her portraits and photographs of New York in the 1930's, Abbott's



Berenice Abbott,  
*Magnetic Field: Magnet, Key, and Iron Fillings*

most ambitious and difficult endeavor began in the 1940's when her interest shifted to science, which she recognized as a prime factor in twentieth-century life. With a thoroughness and rigor typical of her work she enrolled in science courses in order to gain the understanding necessary to photograph some aspects of science. The problems in this pioneering work were enormous. Abbott had to invent techniques and equipment to accomplish her task. Then women were not welcomed in science labs, few people were able to understand what Abbott intended, and of those who understood, few thought it possible. Only after many

years was her work recognized, and she was asked in 1958 to participate in the MIT based Physical Science Study Committee of Educational Services, Inc. This was followed by the photographic illustrations for three physics books in the 1960's. Abbott's photographs from this period of magnetism, gravity, and motion — the underpinnings of life — exhibit a clarity and elegance while at the same time they illustrate brilliantly the laws of physics.

During the 1950's Abbott began another project of grand design, photographing all of Route One from Maine to Florida. It was on this trip in 1954 that she

discovered Maine, which has been her home since 1965.

Throughout her life Abbott's vision has remained uncompromising and steadfast. Whether her subject matter be people, the city, science or Maine, the heart of all her work remains essentially portraiture — revealing the interior through photographs of the exterior.

Paula Gerson



Berenice Abbott, *Portrait of James Joyce*

- 1898 Born in Springfield, Ohio.
- 1918-23 Studied sculpture in New York, Berlin, and Paris.
- 1923-25 Paris, worked as assistant to Man Ray.
- 1926 Paris, first exhibition, "Portraits Photographique," at Au Sacre du Printemps gallery.
- 1926-29 Paris, operated own portrait studio.
- 1927 Purchased prints and negatives of Eugene Atget after his death.
- 1929 Returned to New York; began documenting the city.
- 1934-36 Produced photographs for two exhibitions organized by Henry-Russell Hitchcock: "Urban Vernacular Architecture," and "The Architecture of H. H. Richardson."
- 1934-1958 Taught at the New School for Social Research, New York.
- 1935-39 Director of WPA Federal Art Project, "Changing New York."
- 1937 Exhibition of New York photographs at the Museum of the City of New York.
- 1954 Working on Route One project.
- 1958-1961 Worked at MIT for The Physical Science Study Commission of Educational Services, Inc.; produced "The Image of Physics" exhibition for the Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C.
- 1968 Sold Atget collection to the Museum of Modern Art, New York; moved from New York to Maine.
- 1970 Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art and publication at the same time of *Berenice Abbott: Photographs*.
- 1981-82 Exhibition of work of the 1920's and 1930's at the International Center of Photography, New York.

# Elsie Driggs

We honor Elsie Driggs who in her love of the dramatic transforms the "ordinary environment" into structures of grandeur. In art, she creates openings for light; in dialogue, she makes moments sparkle.

"The girders go nowhere; that smoke isn't real," Elsie Driggs casually says. "I guess I was always more or less a Surrealist."

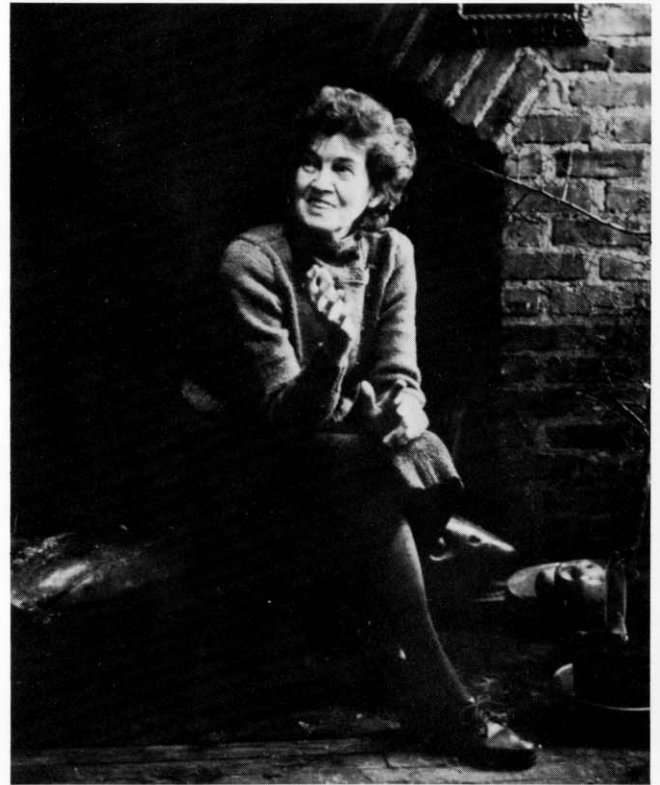
When she was growing up in Pennsylvania, she thought steel mills were dirty. After a year of study in Rome, visiting galleries with Leo Stein, she saw the mill forms with eyes that had come to understand Piero Della Francesca; and she discovered in this familiar subject its monumental aspect.

With the remembrance of early flame images etched in her mind, Driggs planned to paint the light in the night skies of Pittsburgh, the effects of the burning furnaces; instead she used the architecture, which was the source of the power, as her subject.

In the late 20's she was considered by her art dealer, Charles Daniel, to be a "new Classicist" and by the press, to be a "Precisionist." She sketched at factories, airplane hangers, as well as the mills, returning to the studio to distill her observations, wedding the new experiences to her "feel" for "resolved form."

Presently, Elsie Driggs once more is using precise Classical forms, arranging the columns, the doors, the towers, the shafts of light in a different configuration, creating an interior space with a hint of an outer world.

In seeing the full range of her work, it becomes obvious that her concerns are not strictly formalist ones. While our first impression is of mass, on close observation we see how she uses atmosphere to evoke a poetry, to reveal a presence, as well as to dissolve the obtrusiveness of mass and to use the mediating effects of light, clouds or smoke in order to create high drama.



Elsie Driggs  
Photo: John Woggaman

Driggs has come to call this method "the Slow" and "the Quick." She creates stability with the first approach and uses the other as the element of surprise, the irrational, and the transitory. The effects of "the Quick" forms leave us with new questions about the nature of her subject, awaken our curiosity about the work, and makes us eager to discover if "that next one" will provide answers or raise more questions.

Elsie Driggs' quest is to put on paper the images that are pre-shaped in her mind. Remembrance of flames and smoke had been "presences" for her, as are the images of feet which she now creates. She is not paying homage to an exterior image, be it the heroic



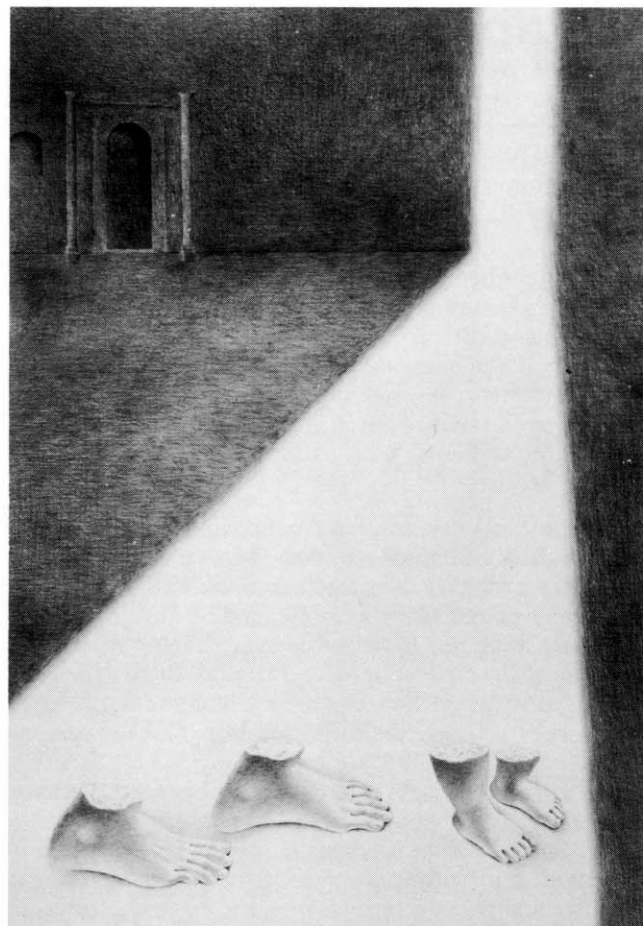
machine, as critics have exclusively implied, but rather to an interior vision that persists.

Ora Lerman

- 1898 Born in Hartford, Connecticut.
- 1923 Studied with Maurice Sterne, Rome.
- 1927 On site studies of blast furnaces, Pittsburgh.
- 1928 Solo exhibition, Daniel Gallery, New York City.
- 1930 Museum of Modern Art Inaugural Exhibition, "Under 35."
- 1932 Whitney Museum Inaugural Show, "First Annual."
- 1934 WPA, Murals for Treasury Relief Art Project and Harlem River Housing Project.
- 1935 Yaddo Fellowship, Saratoga Springs, New York.
- 1936-53 Solo exhibitions, Rehn Gallery, New York.
- 1982-83 Solo show. Martin Diamond Fine Arts Gallery, New York City.



Elsie Driggs, *(Pittsburg)* (1927) Oil on canvas, 34" x 40"  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York  
Photo: Geoffrey Clements



Elsie Driggs, *Lumiere* (1981) Colored crayon pencil, crayon  
and graphite on hand made paper, 46" x 31"  
Courtesy: Martin Diamond Fine Arts

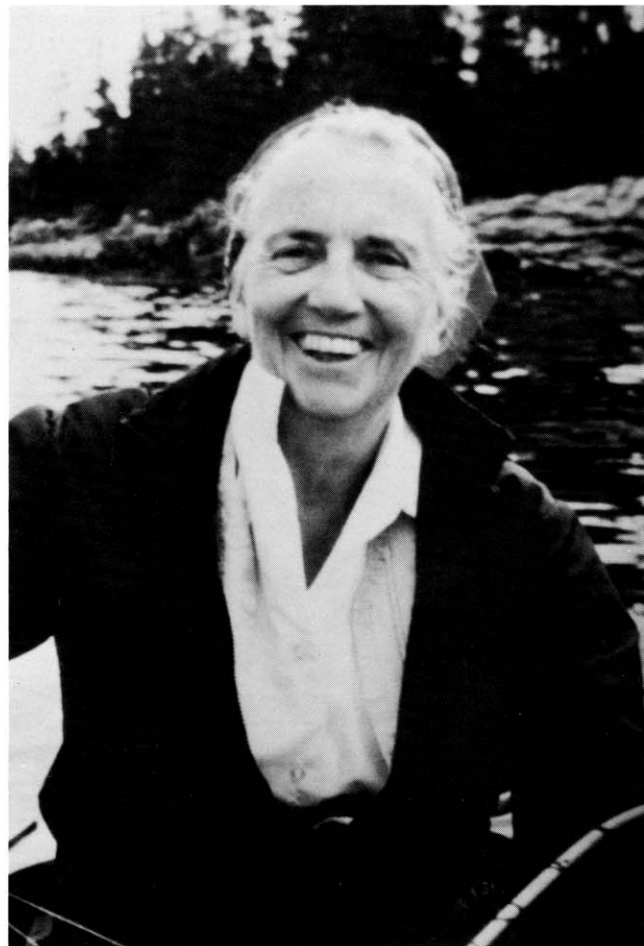
# Elizabeth Gilmore Holt

We honor today Elizabeth Gilmore Holt for her life-long and enthusiastic dedication to making the history of art speak to us vividly through the words of its creators.

At an age when most people are happy to relax from their life's labors, Elizabeth Gilmore Holt haunts libraries and flies around the world on stand-by. One wonders if she is racing against time. Or making up for the many years that she had to carry on her work far removed from research centers, in Thessalonike, Vientiane, or New Delhi, as the wife of a foreign service officer.

Through her three volume *Documentary History of Art*, Holt is a familiar name to even more generations of undergraduates than the redoubtable Janson; and yet many people react with astonishment that she is not only alive but as active as ever, having recently published the first volume of *Triumph of Art for the Public*, and is finishing the second volume with the support of a Guggenheim Fellowship. This woman, so well known by reputation to so many, seems at times to be invisible. She is a passionately engaged teacher, and yet has had very few graduate students of her own. She has often used her work to *create* a room of her own, a private space away from her duties as a mother and foreign service wife and hostess. Not a little of Holt's fierce dedication and energy seems to come from feeling herself an outsider to the art history profession. While Holt's career as an independent scholar has been eccentric by any male standard of what is right and normal, it is not unusual for many professional women of her generation.

Holt's posture as an outsider to an elitist profession, however, only developed through force of circumstances in her adult life; her childhood was spent very much in the political and cultural mainstream. Holt was strongly affected by the vigorous academic community of the University of Wisconsin where her father, E. A. Gilmore, was professor of law from 1902 to 1922 and allied with the Progressive Republicanism



Elizabeth Gilmore Holt

of Governor La Follette. She grew up in an intellectual atmosphere which encouraged social and political co-operation between the university faculty and the larger community. The basically Jacksonian idea that the educated citizen had a moral obligation to be a civic leader, and not just a competent specialist, seemed a particularly fitting ideal for a land grant institution such as Wisconsin. Elizabeth was thoroughly exposed to the persuasive logic of these

arguments; they formed her intellectually, and are at the root of many of her professional endeavors. When she returned to this country after completing her graduate work, she supervised the first community arts center, in Raleigh, North Carolina, organized under the W.P.A. At the same time, she taught at Duke University, and in 1938 she taught at Talladega, a Black college in Alabama.

It was also during this period that she began compiling the sources for the *Documentary History of Art*, which was first published in 1947, with succeeding volumes published in 1958 and 1966. These anthologies have become standard references for students of art history. In recent years, the anthology of writings on art has become a standard genre and a mainstay of college texts. Holt's documentary history was the first such anthology to make primary art historical sources easily available in translation. As the noted philosopher Katharine Gilbert wrote in the forward to the first edition: "The materials lifted here from the graves of old books in old libraries . . . are fit to put new life and plastic quality into the familiar story of the evolution of styles."

The documents which Holt has chosen reveal her own bias in favor of art history as one aspect of intellectual and cultural history, intimately related to the prevailing religious ideals and scientific theories, and directly affected by patronage, audiences and other social conditions of the time. An early exposure to Dvorak's theories in his *Kunstgeschichte als geistgeschichte* (*Art History as Cultural History*) as an undergraduate at Wisconsin was important in giving definition to her own interest in art historical scholarship. After graduating from Wisconsin in 1929, she continued her studies at Harvard, one of the few American programs to admit women, and completed her Ph.D. in 1934 at the University of Munich under Wilhelm Pinder.

Since her husband's retirement from the foreign Service in 1970, Holt has been based in this country, but is constantly on the move, although now her many trips are designed around her own research needs. In this period she has collected, translated and annotated the selections for her recent monograph,

*The Triumph of Art for the Public*, which has enjoyed critical success since its publication in 1979. Using a format similar to the documentary histories, *Triumph*, and its soon-to-be-published sequel, *The Art of All Nations*, documents the significance and impact of the large public exhibition as a social and cultural institution.

Josephine Withers

- 1905 Born in San Francisco, raised in Madison, Wisconsin.
- 1929 B.A. University of Wisconsin, Art History major.
- 1932 M.A. Radcliffe in Art History.
- 1934 Ph.D. University of Munich in Art History with minor in Archaeology.
- 1934-36 Instructor in Art History, Duke University.
- 1935-36 Technical Supervisor of W.P.A. Federal Art Project for North Carolina; in that capacity opened first Community Art Center in the country under that program, in Raleigh, North Carolina.
- 1936 Married John B. Holt.
- 1938-39 Visiting Lecturer at Talladega College, Talladega, Alabama.
- 1946-64 As Foreign Service wife, lived successively in Berlin (1946-51), Thessalonike (1951-53), Vientiane (1959-61), Zurich (1962-63), and New Delhi (1963-64).
- 1954-55 Chair, Committee on Status of Women, American Association of University Women.
- 1955-57 Visiting Lecturer, American University.
- 1968-71 Visiting Lecturer, Michigan State University.
- 1976 Visiting Lecturer, Boston University.  
Project Director for documentary film, "Pictures to Serve the People: American Lithography 1830-1855."
- 1979-80 Guggenheim Fellowship, for completion of *Triumph of Art for the Public*.
- 1980 Honorary doctorate, Syracuse University.

# Katharine Kuh

*"For more than fifty years I have enjoyed a love affair with art. It has been the focus of my life." K. K., December, 1981.*

**Katharine Kuh** — a leading authority on art of the past and present and author of many books and catalogues, has followed a life-long career in art. In an extraordinary range of functions as curator, editor, teacher, gallery director, lecturer, writer, researcher, consultant and collector, excelling at each, she has served art and society. It is for these achievements that we are honoring her today.

Katharine Kuh has written five major art books, and dozens of catalogues; she has organized numerous important exhibitions and taught about art and art ideas. She has travelled to countless far-flung places, wherever aspects of the overlay of art and civilization were waiting to be explored, and everywhere she has searched out and brought loving attention to neglected works of the past. Her professional achievements include major curatorial and editorial positions and numerous honorary doctorates. She has pioneered in corporate and institutional art consulting, breaking new ground in assembling the renowned collection of the First National Bank of Chicago, which unlike the usual corporate collection, is based on the merit of the work alone and spans the history of art from the sixth century, B.C., to the present. It is evident that Katharine Kuh is a one-woman art movement — and the portents were there at the proverbial very early age.

At the age of ten, Katharine Kuh was invalided and confined to a wheelchair for several years. During this time she studied the history of art with her father, a businessman who was a passionate collector of art. He brought his daughter books on art and encouraged her to catalogue his extensive print collection. She completed the project by age 12 or 13, and from then on there was little question about the focus of her life.



Katharine Kuh

After growing up in the midwest, Kuh attended Vassar College, where, as she put it, her luck was to have Alfred Barr as teacher — and as friend from there on. She completed a Masters' degree at the University of Chicago in 1928, and began doctoral studies at New York University, these last were interrupted by marriage and relocation to the Chicago area. However, stuffy suburban life soon palled, and Kuh cast about for away to make a living on her own.

In 1935, in the midst of the Great Depression, the city of Chicago saw the intrepid opening of the Katharine Kuh Gallery for Contemporary and Experimental Art. Here were shown such avant garde artists as Kandinsky, Leger, Klee, Miro, Seligmann and Albers — but Chicago didn't like them much. The only regular customers, buying what no one else wanted or was ready for, were Mies van der Rohe and Claire Zeisler. The gallery also pioneered in exhibiting photography and design.

Ultimately, World War II forced the closing of the

gallery and Kuh found employment at the Art Institute of Chicago, where she remained for some 17 years. Although best known for her final position as Curator of Modern Painting and Sculpture, Kuh was simultaneously curator of the Art Institute's Gallery of Art Interpretation. There she developed new methods and experimental techniques for explaining art to the lay person, in what in her own estimate was her best job, and most important contribution. As a sideline, at the same time, she edited the *Bulletin*, lectured, and filled in a couple of other slots at the Institute.

Kuh returned to New York in 1959, this time as art editor for what was then the *Saturday Review of Literature*. As always, however, she was soon involved in several additional careers. In addition to her full-time editor's job, she wrote several books, worked as an art consultant and continued to organize a variety of exhibitions.

As well as the many major shows listed in the chronology, were such additional significant events as *Constable and Turner: The Road to Impressionism*, *Space and Distance*, *The Artist Takes Liberty with Nature*, *Sculpture*, *Pasada: Mexican Artist*, *How Real is Realism* — all done between 1948 and 1958.

Throughout the years, in an achievement analogous to the curating of major shows, Kuh pursued the exploration, study and acquisition of art in remote places. In 1946, on a special mission for the United States Office of Indian Affairs, she travelled to Alaska to report on totem carvings, returning four times for additional studies. She also made several arduous journeys to India for the Smithsonian Institution to research traditional and contemporary Indian art.

One might wonder, reviewing this extraordinary achievement, whether there were no barriers, no setbacks, particularly for a woman in those times. Kuh comments that she did indeed suffer the financial and professional discrimination found by women in the arts. She had to fight her own battles, she says, winning only because she was "such a good fighter." But she retains to this day a sense of outrage at inequities experienced, observed, and still existing in many areas.

In her early days at the Art Institute, Kuh had volunteered to teach a class of working women, immigrant seamstresses of the ILGWU, who came to class at the end of their working day to learn about art. It took several sessions and a dwindling class for Kuh to discover that what the women wanted to learn was not the history of art, but how to decorate their homes. Admitting that she couldn't teach interior decoration, Kuh offered instead to take the class out into the city to talk about its sights and buildings. These trips — a visit to an art gallery, an artist's studio, and finally, the Art Institute — were exciting and satisfying to the women. They learned, not the history of art, but the feel of art.

One might say, finally, that it is the *feel of art* Katharine Kuh has cherished since childhood. She brought it to a school, and a bank and a magazine; she spread it by teaching, and writing and lecturing; she shipped it out for the world at large in books and catalogues and articles. She followed it to sources obscure or celebrated, in forms modern or primitive, in remote villages or major urban centers; Katharine Kuh's "feel of art" has enhanced our lives and our times.

Cynthia Navaretta

1904	Born in St. Louis, Missouri, July 15.
1925	Vassar College, B.A.
1928	University of Chicago, M.A.
1929	New York University, postgraduate studies.
1935-42	Owner/director Katharine Kuh Gallery, Chicago.
1938-40 (summers)	University School of Fine Arts, San Miguel, Mexico, Visiting Professor.
1942-59	Art Institute of Chicago, Curator Gallery of Art Interpretation, Associate Curator, then Curator, Modern Painting and Sculpture, simultaneous with editorship of the <i>Bulletin of the Art Institute</i> .
1956	Organizer, American Exhibition for the Venice Biennale, "The Artist Paints the City."
1959-71	<i>Saturday Review</i> , Art Editor.
1972-73	<i>World Magazine</i> , Art Editor.
1973-77	<i>Saturday Review</i> , Art Editor.
1963-present	Art Consultant, San Francisco Museum of Art, Southern Illinois University, First National Bank of Chicago (director of art program).



# Charmion von Wiegand

Charmion von Wiegand: painter, writer, collector, and benefactor — particularly of Mondrian and of Buddhist refugees in this country, we salute you for your long, distinguished career, for your advocacy of abstract and oriental art, and for the proof in your own life of Rosa Bonheur's statement that: "Genius has no sex."

Although she is often linked with Mondrian and her work included in "Mondrian circle" exhibitions, von Wiegand established a very productive career in her own right. She began to paint after therapy sessions caused her to remember colors she had seen as a child in Chinese festivals in San Francisco; she also recalled her Chinese cook's advice to "paint, no look." Following the example of her father, a well-known journalist, she became a writer first, and did not paint seriously until sent as a correspondent to Russia, where she saw Van Gogh's and Derain's paintings in famous Russian collections.

Back in America, she married Joseph Freeman, author and editor, most notably of *New Masses*. They lived in New York City, which was frustrating for von Wiegand to deal with pictorially, so she stopped painting for a while. She met Mondrian as a European refugee from the war, in 1941, when commissioned by the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* to write the first critical article in America on his work.

As a result, von Wiegand became fascinated with Neo-Plasticism and with the artist, whom she helped with his writing and frequently watched at work. At his urging, she joined the American Abstract Artists (and later on, in the 1950s, became its president), but did not follow Mondrian's influence until over a year after he died.

Calling herself "essentially an expressionist," von Wiegand would not have painted Mondrian's way at all had she not become interested in Theosophy, which was to affect her work more strongly than his.

On reading Book III of *The Secret Doctrine*, the artist was fascinated by the color notes and oriental canons



Charmion von Wiegand  
Photo: Stella Snead

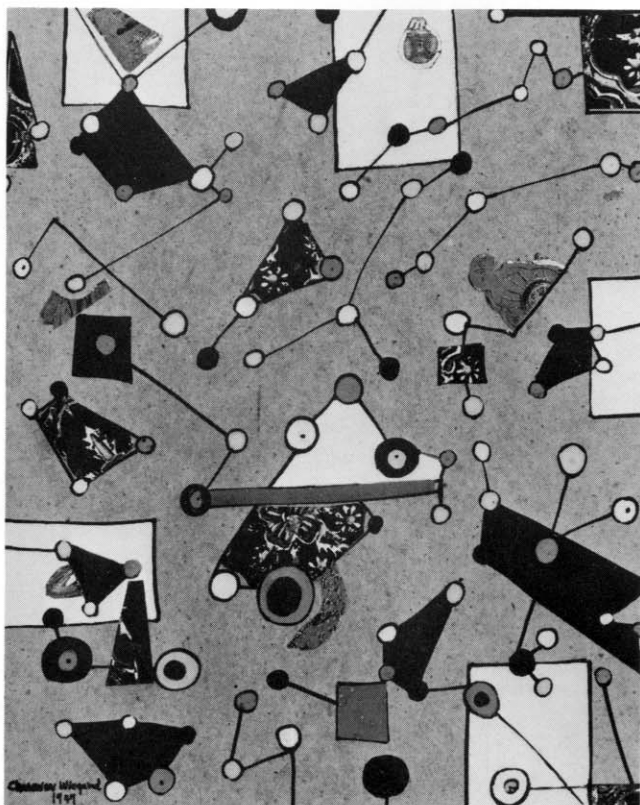
— Egyptian, Chinese, Indian, and Tibetan — from which Madame Blavatsky had taken her prismatic colors. Von Wiegand called them the minor chords, as opposed to Mondrian's major ones, but found that when placed in a Mondrianesque format, they lent themselves perfectly to abstracted schemes taken from an Egyptian sanctuary or Buddhist tomb.

Von Wiegand's interests turned gradually more Eastward, and her paintings departed from right-angled relationships toward circles and diagonals that were redolent of Chinese philosophic and Tibetan religious themes. Finally, she drew her forms and symbolism almost entirely from Tantric Buddhism. She did not try to be illustrational, but found that her oriental friends (exiles in this country) could "read"

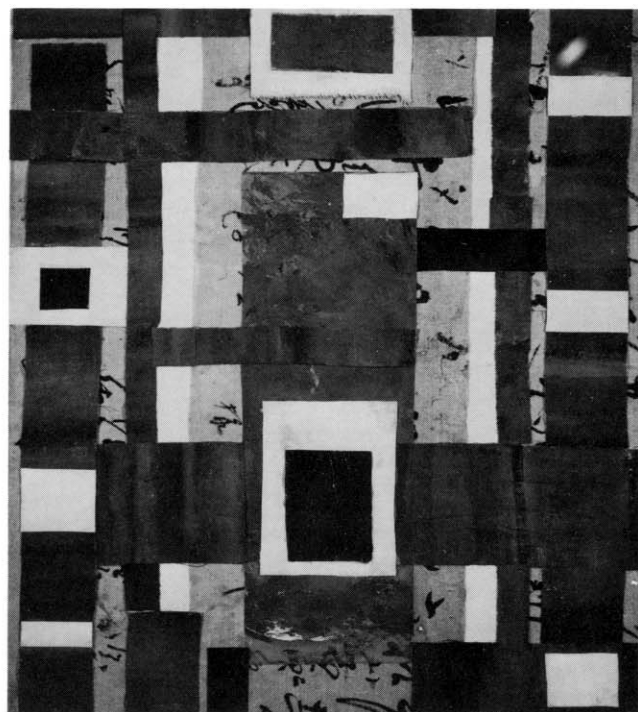
the paintings. This was partly because she used some of the canonical colors and imagery, but also because pure Tantric art was already geometric, since it represented the Tantric contemplation of the "mystery of the universe" (according to Ajit Mookerjee, *Tantra Art*, Paris, 1966-67, p.13).

Her inclusion of hermetic symbolism revealed expanded interest in what had at one time interested Mondrian. The harmonic colors, circles, and triangles were merely her way of bringing in the feminine.

Virginia Pitts Rembert



Charmion von Wiegand, *Untitled* (1947)  
Gouache on board, 13½" x 10½"  
Courtesy: Marilyn Pearl Gallery  
Photo: Eric Pollizer



Charmion von Wiegand, *The Tris Gate* (1956)  
Collage No. 155, 14½" x 13"  
Milwaukee Art Center  
Photo: eeve-inkeri

BORN: Chicago, Illinois

EDUCATION: Public and private schools in San Francisco and Europe, Barnard College, Columbia University, studying journalism, Greek, philosophy, drama, archeology, and art history for what she describes as "a Humanist education but no degree."

ARTISTIC CAREER: Represented in over 25 museums and permanent collections; over 20 one-artist exhibitions; and over 35 important group exhibitions in America, Europe, and the Far East. Among the most recent have been "Constructivism and the Geometric Tradition" (from the McCrory Foundation Collection), shown for two years at museums or galleries in the following cities: Buffalo, Dallas, San Francisco, LaJolla, Seattle, Pittsburgh, Kansas City, Detroit, and Milwaukee (1979-81); "Mondrian and Neo-Plasticism in America," Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven (1979); "Geometric Abstraction and Related Work," The Newark Museum (1978); and "Paris-New York," Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (1977).

# Claire Zeisler

**We honor Claire Zeisler as a weaver of multi-dimensional forms and a builder of powerful presences. The ancient techniques of knotting and wrapping fibers have found new life, and new meanings, in her hands.**

Claire Zeisler's work is an exploration that involves a viewer in unexpected perceptions about the nature and form of fiber. From fascinating small artifacts to impressive symbolic structures, all the work bears witness to Zeisler's early interest in so-called "primitive" art forms. She collected American baskets and primitive art in the 1940s and her first exhibition at the Chicago Public Library demonstrated the close relationship between her weaving and her collecting.

Zeisler's professional career did not begin until the 1960s. She was mostly self taught, though she also studied with the sculptors Archipenko and Moholy-Nagy before turning to weaving. This long preparation provided a solid base for her debut and for her radical reinterpretation of traditional techniques. The early fiber works are two-dimensional, but not rectangular or even regular in shape. Fringe, jagged edges, slits, added materials and other violations of the wholeness of the fabric suggest stories or puzzles, even ritual spells. The larger works increasingly emphasize relief and projection from the surface until, by 1967, they move entirely away from the wall. By the late 1970s, the pieces have become fully three-dimensional; they demand to be approached cautiously, walked around, peered into, pondered.

"My greatest excitement has always come from the fiber itself, raw, unrefined, unchanged from its natural state," Zeisler has said. The materials themselves extend a message: the resilience of natural fibers — wool, jute, raw silk — complements and merges with the flexibility and longevity of the ancient techniques of wrapping and knotting. Zeisler was the first contemporary artist to revive the weaving techniques of Pre-Columbian Peru. She first tried knotting in the mid 1960s; she learned it from a Haitian studio assistant while she was studying briefly



Claire Zeisler

Courtesy: Young Hoffman Gallery

with Lilie Blumenau in New York. Leather pieces, dyed in a limited range of soft tan, grey and red, were used in a number of works around 1976, stitched together into forms that seem to move and breathe softly. Many of these pieces are small and delicate. Some are in series with rather whimsical suggestions of stories about them; others are as mysterious as primitive dolls or fetishes.

Zeisler has the ability to transform her materials but she also has deep respect for their natural integrity. Describing her knotting and wrapping techniques to Katharine Kuh, she said, "The heavy fibers have a life of their own which I do not want to obscure."

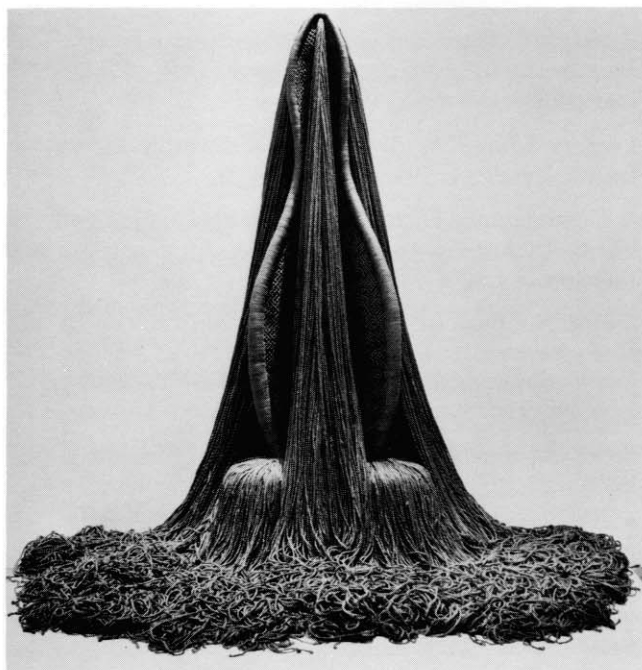
She no longer considers herself primarily a weaver, but a sculptor in fiber. The material does not limit her choice of imagery of form in any way.



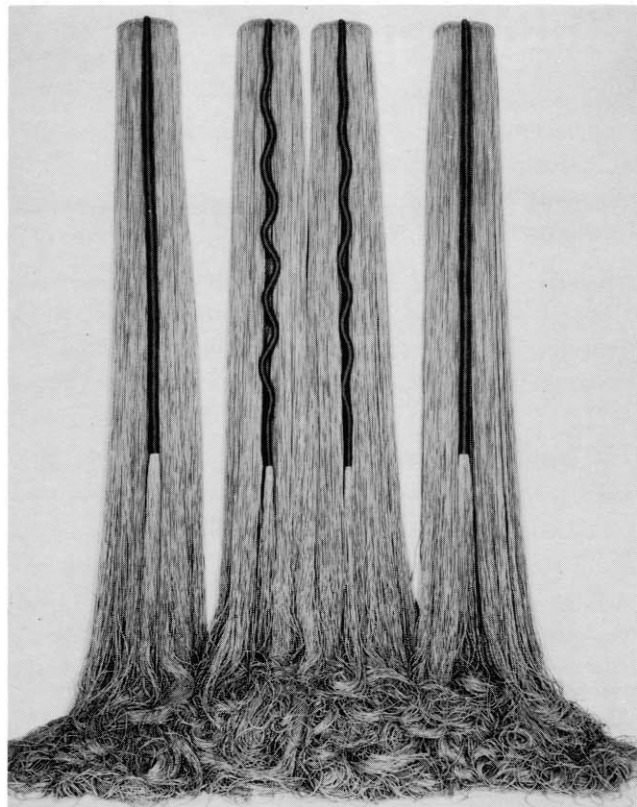
The coherence of Zeisler's work, the craftsmanship and the vision in the individual pieces as well as a broader sense of a direction and a goal, has been shown in recent retrospective exhibitions. Her own statement of her aims to Katharine Kuh nearly fifteen years ago may still be valid: "What I'm trying to do is give raw threads a structure that only such threads can achieve."

### Alison Hilton

- 1903 Born Claire Bloch in Cincinnati, Ohio.
- c.1930 In Chicago, met Katharine Kuh and became interested in modern art.
- mid 1940s Studied with Alexander Archipenko and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy at Illinois Institute of Technology, and with Chicago weaver Bea Swartchild.
- 1962-63 Began serious work in weaving; met Lenore Tawney and Shiela Hicks. First solo exhibition at Chicago Public Library, group exhibitions at Museum of Contemporary Crafts, New York and Kunstgewerbemuseum, Zurich.



Claire Zeisler, *Red Preview* (1969)  
Red jute, 96" x 60"  
Art Institute of Chicago



Claire Zeisler, *Totem* (1978)  
Natural hemp, wrapped synthetic threads, 108" x 12"  
Courtesy: Young Hoffman Gallery

- mid 1960s Studied with Lilie Blumenau in New York; introduced to knotting.
- 1966-67 Travel to Egypt, Africa. Beginning of work on large knotted pieces.
- 1969 "Perspectief in Textiel," Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; several group exhibitions.
- 1970 Solo exhibition, Northwest Illinois University, De Kalb.
- 1971-75 Biennale Internationale de Tapisserie, Lausanne. Travel to South Pacific, Africa, Southeast Asia, Afghanistan.
- 1977 Large fiber works using coiling technique. *Winter White* acquired by Museum of Contemporary Crafts, New York.
- 1979 Claire Zeisler. A Retrospective at Art Institute of Chicago.
- 1980 Solo exhibitions at California State University at Fullerton and St. Louis Art Museum.

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