ALMA THOMAS AND LEE KRASNER: BROAD STROKES

Alma Thomas (1891-1978) was an African-American painter in Washington, D.C., who was associated with the Washington color field painters. She started to paint full-time only after she retired from her job as a schoolteacher. Lee Krasner (1908-1984) was a Jewish-American painter in New York associated with the New York school–abstract expressionism. She was also the wife, then widow, of Jackson Pollock. We thought it would be interesting to imagine them having tea together...or maybe a double scotch:

Alma: Lee, what was it like to live your whole life in New York City and go to those prestigious art schools and hang out with all the other abstract expressionists? Me, I lived in Washington almost my whole life, after we moved north from Georgia. I did go to Teachers College at Columbia in New York, but I studied education. In my family, the men went to business (with success, I would add) and the women were teachers.

ALMA THOMAS, 1976. PHOTO: MIKE FISCHER, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, WASHINGTON, D.C./ART RESOURCE, NEW YORK

Lee: I went to the best art schools and I never felt discriminated against because I was female. Of course I had to work harder to be taken seriously, but that's the way of the world; you can't change that. I took it as a compliment when my teacher Hans Hofmann called a canvas of mine "so good you wouldn't know it was painted by a woman." I changed my name from Lenore to Lee, and signed my paintings with just my initials, but everyone was doing that, then. As for the abstract expressionists, the women who went to the Cedar Bar, where the guys got drunk and talked about art, were treated like cattle. You were lucky to have missed that.

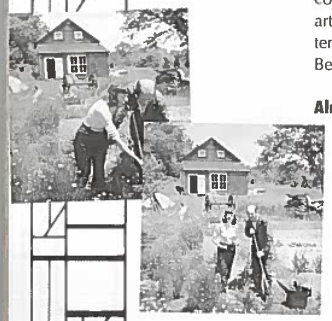
Alma: Well, I did have the lifelong support of my colleagues and teachers, especially at Howard University, where I was the very first art student. Starting in the 1940's, I met regularly with other African-American artists, mostly schoolteachers like myself. We called ourselves "Little Paris," and we sketched and painted together and talked endlessly about art. We were more focused on European modernism than what was happening in New York. We were such outsiders that we even had to start our own galleries. In 1943 I helped found the Barnett-Aden Gallery, which, I am proud to say, was the first integrated gallery in D.C.

Lee: New York was full of artists and galleries, but it wasn't easy to get your work shown, especially if you were female. We white women abstract expressionists didn't think we were being mistreated, although that's what the feminists would have us believe. Most of us were involved with the men who created the macho aesthetic. We loved them! We were happy when they won acclaim. Jackson and I worked side by side for years, and our paintings evolved together. His were usually big. Mine were smaller. (His studio was in our big barn and mine was in a small upstairs bedroom.) I had my first one-person show at Betty Parsons when I was forty-three and I was so ashamed of my age that I shaved a couple of years off my bio. And I was careful not to show work that was similar to Jackson's since everyone assumed that our style was started by him.

LEE KRASNER IN FRONT OF HER WORK. ©ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK. PHOTO: EVA WATSKY/ART RESOURCE, NEW YORK

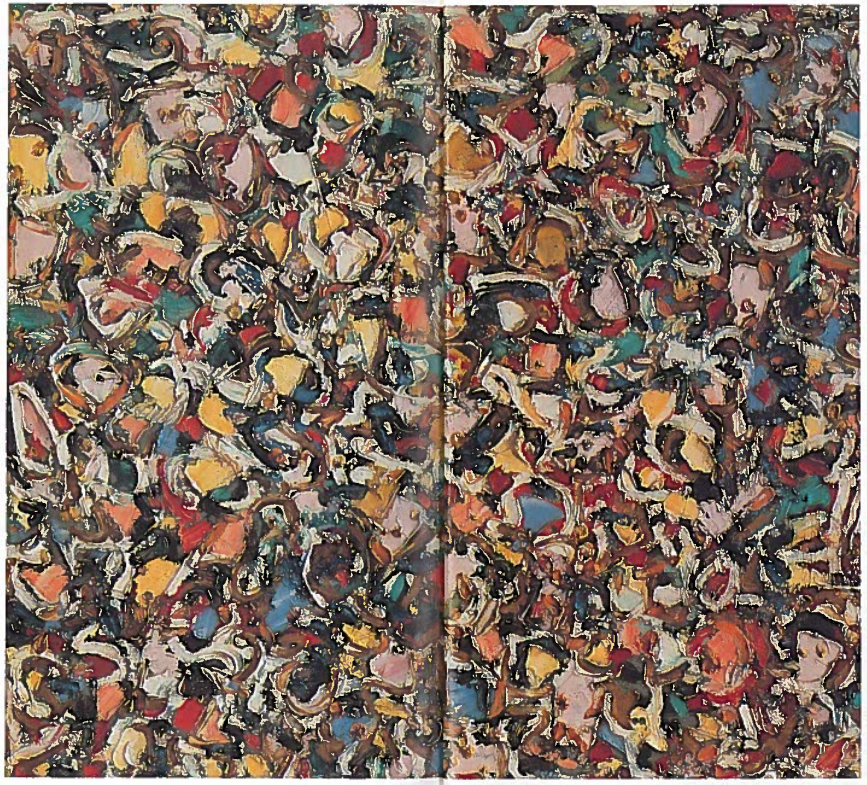
ABOVE: ALMA THOMAS, *EOSIAN FIELDS*, 1973. NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, WASHINGTON, D.C./ BEQUEST OF ALMA THOMAS/ART RESOURCE, NEW YORK

Critics and historians want to believe that new ideas come from a single individual. They make art into a horse race. Even well-respected critics like Arthur Danto couldn't see me for who I was: "It is difficult to respond to her save as a shadow of artists greater than her, her teacher Hofmann, her husband, and her luminous contemporaries of the New York school." I couldn't avoid it, even after Jackson died. Being married to an art world "genius" didn't always work in my favor.



LEE AND JACKSON AT HOME, 1950, SPRINGS, NEW YORK. LEE KRASNER PAPERS, ARCHIVES OF AMERICAN ART, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, WASHINGTON, D.C. PHOTOS: WILFRED ZOGBAUM

Alma: You're right in that I never had to deal with any man complicating my life. I had it pretty much to myself. But you and I both came into our own late, after we had learned how to withstand all the injustices and cruelties. I was almost sixty and retired before I could become a full-time painter. I started to paint in bits and swatches of pure, bright color, based on things I could see in my own backyard. Then I took classes at American University and met those color field painters Kenneth Noland, Morris Louis, Sam Gilliam, and Gene Davis. I know that women are usually considered followers, but I was always mentioned as their artistic equal. Except, they had at least a twenty-five-year jump-start on me. They all had studios, too. But do you know where I did my paintings? On my kitchen table! You and I should start the Bedroom and Kitchen School of Art!



Lee: When Jackson died, stupid interviewers asked me things like "Do you feel you have lost your identity because you happened to be the wife of Jackson Pollock?" Two of his girlfriends—one who was with him in the car when he crashed, and Peggy Guggenheim, who owned the famous fireplace he peed into—both sued the estate. When art critic Harold Rosenberg, who never had a kind thing to say about me, dubbed me the "Action Widow," to reinforce his theory of Jackson as an action painter, I decided to become a "Widow of Action." I renovated his studio for myself and got to work making big canvases. And collages from my old drawings. For twenty years I painted and painted and finally in the seventies the art world was ready to acknowledge that an important woman artist could have been married to an important male artist. I've heard the rumor that pressure from feminist artists and art historians led to my retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art in 1983, but I don't believe it. Why would feminists help me, someone with absolutely no sympathy for their cause? I've done plenty for others, myself, though: I left my money (which mostly came from Jackson's posthumous sales) to The Pollock-Krasner Foundation to help needy artists.

Alma: Yes, it was a long haul for us both. I think I had three distinct lives: first as a teacher, then as a student, and finally as a painter. Fisk University organized a major show of my new work in 1971, when I was eighty. Then I had an exhibit at the Whitney Museum of American Art, in 1972, and an even larger one at the Corcoran Gallery of Art here in D.C. It was about time! Those Guerrilla Girls were right when they said that one of the advantages of being a woman artist is knowing your career might pick up after you're eighty. But that's a whole lot better than being a washed-up white male genius at thirty-five!

ABOVE: LEE KRASNER, NOON, 1947. ROBERT MILLER GALLERY. ©1998 POLLOCK KRASNER FOUNDATION, ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

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