

VISION AND GRIT: MARGARET LOWENGRUND AND NEW YORK'S FEMALE GALLERISTS OF THE 1950S

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When Margaret Lowengrund founded The Contemporaries gallery and print workshop in 1951, she became part of a postwar art scene that female gallerists and art dealers increasingly dominated. Since the early twentieth century, New York's art world offered women artist-entrepreneurs—such as Edith Halpert, owner of the Downtown Gallery, and socialites and collectors such as Peggy Guggenheim and Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney—the opportunity to wield cultural influence and build successful careers. By the 1940s and early 1950s, the industry expanded to include a new generation of women, among them Grace Borgenicht, Martha Jackson, Betty Parsons, Marian Willard, and Virginia Zabriskie.¹ Each gallerist brought distinct interests, abilities, and approaches that distinguished their exhibition programs and fostered new developments in art in the United States. Although Lowengrund's contribution has been understudied, she built the foundations of the postwar contemporary print market among artists, collectors, and the public in the United States.

Female Gallerists and the Postwar Art Scene

In contrast to art patrons like Whitney and Guggenheim who powerfully shaped the New York art scene with the support of their immense fortunes, the new generation of women gallerists who launched businesses in the 1940s and 1950s were upper middle class and often artists themselves. Although many utilized family inheritances or the support of their spouses to finance their galleries, their ambitions were dependent on creating sustainable business models. A popular strategy was presenting a mix of modern and contemporary art.²

Grace Borgenicht and Virginia Zabriskie were among the leading gallerists whose curatorial programs emphasized modern art, while still including contemporary artists. In 1951, Borgenicht,

a painter, established her eponymous gallery on Fifty-Seventh Street, following up her experience working in Chris Ritter's Laurel Gallery. Borgenicht represented a diverse array of modernists from the United States including Milton Avery, Ilya Bolotowsky, and Gertrude Greene, as well as contemporary artists Jimmy Ernst, José de Rivera, Reuben Kadish, and Wolf Kahn. Borgenicht was inspired to start the gallery because she recognized the paltry level of support for artists from the United States in museums and commercial galleries.³ Borgenicht later recalled that she needed tremendous self-confidence to run the gallery, which took a number of years to achieve financial stability.⁴

Following a similar model, Zabriskie, who had degrees in art history from New York University, founded Zabriskie Gallery in 1954. Early exhibitions—including *The City 1900–1930* (1957), *The Eight* (1958), *A Decade of American Cubism* (1958) and *Collage in America* (1958–59)—provided surveys of key movements that defined modernism. Zabriskie Gallery also represented a roster of contemporary artists. Although Zabriskie had no prior business experience, she attributed her sustained success to her emphasis on the gallery's commercial function, noting: "You've got to remember you are a retail store. You must bring attention to and make money for your artists."⁵

Marian Willard, Martha Jackson, and Betty Parsons established galleries that focused on avant-garde contemporary art, placing it in context with modernism. Influenced by the writings of Carl Jung, the practice of Zen Buddhism, and the work of Paul Klee, Willard opened her gallery in 1940, with a specialization in abstraction and surrealism. She was instrumental in introducing audiences in the United States to the work of Dorothy Dehner, Richard Pousette-Dart, David Smith, and West Coast artists Morris Graves and Mark Tobey. Willard recalled that her business relied on a niche group of loyal collectors.⁶

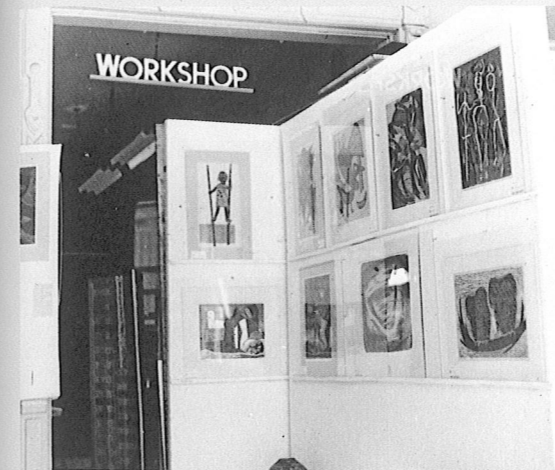


Fig. 1 Interior of The Contemporaries at 959 Madison Avenue, ca. 1952–55. Photo by Robert Delson

Martha Jackson opened her gallery in 1953 and developed an exhibition program that juxtaposed postwar art from Europe and the United States alongside emerging artists like the Gutai Group and stylistic trends like Neo-Dada. Jackson later reflected on her pioneering efforts to organize "this great agglomeration of art . . . and the young artists and develop them in a business way," laboring always "to use the gallery as an example of how art dealing should be carried on in the best way."⁷ Artist and collector Betty Parsons opened her Fifty-Seventh Street gallery in 1946 with an eye toward experimental and unconventional work. Known for representing Jackson Pollock, she also advanced the careers of many women artists including Helen Frankenthaler, Judith Godwin, and Hedda Sterne. Summarizing the experience of visiting the Parsons Gallery, art critic Lawrence Campbell wrote: "A visitor . . . is immediately struck by a mood unlike that of a commercial art gallery. It is more like an artist's cooperative."⁸ Both Parsons and Jackson pioneered the white-box gallery, often hanging paintings without frames, hosting performances, and creating a cultural gathering space for artists, collectors, and the public.

The Founding of The Contemporaries

Margaret Lowengrund's decision to create a hybrid workshop-gallery aligned with the model of the gallery as a creative space embraced by Parsons and Jackson. An experienced artist and

printmaker, Lowengrund understood the limited resources available to artists who wanted to explore new approaches to printmaking. Her print studio allowed artists to experiment affordably with new techniques, while the adjacent sales gallery supported the operation financially and built a market for prints.

Rather than entering the established gallery scene on Fifty-Seventh Street, Lowengrund situated The Contemporaries at 959 Madison Avenue at Seventy-Fifth Street. While Fifty-Seventh Street was the major hub of the New York art world, galleries were beginning to migrate uptown. In 1949 Parke-Bernet Galleries auction house opened at 980 Madison Avenue at Seventy-Sixth Street, and the following year Eleanor Saidenberg, Pablo Picasso's representative in the United States, established her gallery at 10 East Seventy-Seventh Street. In a 1949 article for *World Scope Encyclopedia*, Lowengrund describes her anticipation that "this new location might easily become the nucleus of a new art center."⁹ Lowengrund's decision to open The Contemporaries within this vanguard neighborhood underscores her vision of the gallery as an avant-garde initiative. Furthermore, the location enabled her to develop a print market with less direct competition from midtown galleries and to take advantage of quotidian commercial activity on Madison Avenue's commercial strip—the gallery was located above a bookstore and next to a tailor and furrier.

While Lowengrund's decision to create a gallery and workshop entirely devoted to prints was bold, she built upon the foundations of other galleries catering to print collectors. When she established The Contemporaries, several New York galleries specialized in selling modern prints by artists from Europe and the United States. Weyhe Gallery, a gallery and bookstore located at 794 Lexington Avenue, supported the careers of modernists including Max Weber, Rockwell Kent, Wanda Gág, and William Gropper through the production of affordable prints and portfolios.¹⁰ Another combination bookshop and gallery, Wittenborn Schultz (38 East Fifty-Seventh Street), featured Georges Braque, Picasso, and Max Beckmann, as well as contemporary artists active in the United States.

Two significant forerunners to The Contemporaries were the Serigraph Galleries (later Melzer Gallery), a cooperative nonprofit directed by Doris Melzer, and Associated American Artists (AAA), a print publisher and gallery renowned for its affordably priced etchings and lithographs. Founded



Fig. 2 Margaret Lowengrund inside The Contemporaries at 959 Madison Avenue, ca. 1952–55. Gelatin silver print. Photo by Maurice Berezov

in 1940, Serigraph Galleries at 38 West Fifty-Seventh Street was an active space, hosting film screenings, demonstrations, and other artist-oriented events centered around promoting the screenprint, but it did not include a formal workshop. Reeves Lewenthal established AAA in 1934 as a challenge to the traditional “gallery system.”¹¹ His enterprise was incredibly successful in selling prints to middle-class consumers through direct mail order, in partnership with department stores, and at AAA’s gallery at 711 Fifth Avenue. Lowengrund offered a counterpoint to AAA’s model, targeting serious collectors by showcasing innovative contemporary prints and integrating their presentation in the gallery with an allied workshop that embraced experimentation.

Although only a few photographs of Lowengrund’s gallery at 959 Madison Avenue remain, the images document a modernist, quirky, but well-designed interior (Fig. 1). The mixed-use building had a brownstone facade with both

residential apartments and retail space on the ground and second floors. Lowengrund renovated her second-floor space, adding storage cabinets and shelves to display matted prints. She also added a V-shaped decorative screen to create an office area for her desk and movable walls to allow for flexible exhibition design.

A striking photograph by Maurice Berezov, taken between 1952 and 1955, depicts Lowengrund as a stylish and authoritative gallerist (Fig. 2). Wearing tailored trousers and a formfitting collared blouse, she poses rather seductively against the modernist cabinets, a collection of prints and sculpture artfully installed behind her. Berezov’s image evokes Louis Faurer’s photograph of Edith Halpert in the Downtown Gallery, which appeared in *Life* magazine in 1952 (Fig. 3). Although Faurer’s image featured Downtown Gallery artists holding their artwork in the background, Halpert and Lowengrund are both holding a commanding gaze focused directly at the viewer. As Berezov’s photograph illustrates, prints were



Fig. 3 Edith Gregor Halpert photographed for *Life*, 1952. Photo by Louis Faurer

treated like paintings—in some cases hung unframed, displayed in salon-style groupings, or as solitary pieces—commanding an entire wall.

At 959 Madison Avenue, Lowengrund developed an exhibition program that was in dialogue with the combination of contemporary and modern art shown by Borgenicht, Jackson, and Zabriskie. The Contemporaries’ second exhibition, *Painters and Their Prints* (January–February 1952), featured works by several artists affiliated with 7 Painter-Printmakers, a collective Lowengrund had spearheaded in 1950, including Will Barnet, Sue Fuller, Hans Moller, and John Von Wicht as well as renowned contemporary painters who worked in the print medium such as Milton Avery, Werner Drewes, Rico Lebrun, Seong Moy, and Kurt Seligmann. While Lowengrund represented their graphic work, many of the artists were affiliated with other galleries for their painting. Seong Moy, for example, exhibited with Betty Parsons, Milton Avery with Grace Borgenicht, and Werner Drewes with Kleemann Gallery.

The Contemporaries Gallery of Sculpture and Graphic Art

In the fall of 1955, when 959 Madison Avenue was slated for demolition, Lowengrund separated the gallery and workshop, leasing a large exhibition space at 992 Madison Avenue, directly across from Parke-Bernet, as well as a studio space at 1343 Third Avenue. The new gallery, which she renamed The Contemporaries Gallery of Sculpture and Graphic Art, allowed for more substantial exhibitions and a greater focus on sculpture. Situated on the ground floor, the new space had large window displays facing Madison Avenue and Seventy-Seventh Street.¹²

To create a streamlined interior, Lowengrund hired Robert Delson, a photographer who had designed art centers for the Federal Art Project throughout Florida during the 1930s (Fig. 4).¹³ Delson’s sketches and plans for The Contemporaries as well as photographs of the gallery reveal his use of screens and wall panels mounted on metal supports. These

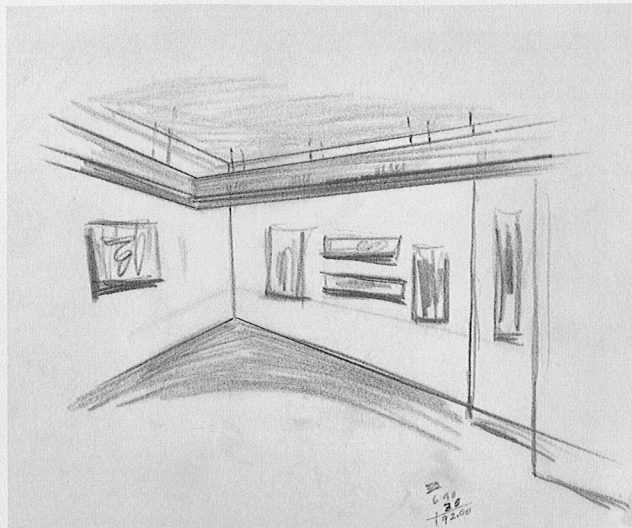


Fig. 4 Robert Delson, *The Contemporaries*, New York, sketch for the interior at 992 Madison Avenue, 1955. Graphite on tracing paper, 9 7/8 x 12 in.



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Today: An Exhibition of Sculpture and Graphic Art* at *The Contemporaries*, 992 Madison Avenue, September 1955. Gelatin silver print. Photo by Robert Delson

lightweight dividers were used to define distinct spaces, such as a seating area/viewing room, and to provide additional wall space (Fig. 5). The result was a more modular aesthetic reflective of the international style. A critic remarked on the aesthetic of the gallery by concluding: "As artistically conceived as any of the works themselves is the structure of the gallery with its flood of natural light, its streamlined display features, and air of elegant restraint."¹⁴

Legacy of The Contemporaries

While it took vision and grit for any of the women gallery owners to succeed, Lowengrund's vision for *The Contemporaries* was more radical and complex than her colleagues'. All of these female gallerists understood the necessity of developing successful commercial business models that focused on sales, the cultivation of collectors, and the promotion of artists. In addition to trying to integrate commercial and nonprofit models, Lowengrund was trying to establish a high-end market for graphic arts, which did not possess the same cachet as painting and sculpture in the early 1950s. It is clear that Lowengrund influenced Martha Jackson, and likely other dealers, by foregrounding the importance of prints as a creative medium and a source of interest for new collectors. In 1965, Katherine Goodman,

a director at Martha Jackson Gallery, proposed establishing a department of prints. Jackson enthusiastically supported the idea and secured a Ford Foundation grant that allowed Goodman to visit the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles to learn about techniques.¹⁵ By that time, Jackson and Goodman were responding to growing interest in print media rather than developing the market, as Lowengrund had. Years earlier, through determined effort, Lowengrund blazed the path for the commercial success of contemporary prints, and her work quickly became a model for these female gallerists to follow.