

# ALICE TRUMBULL MASON





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**ALICE TRUMBULL MASON (1904-1971)**

Alice Trumbull Mason's life — not a happy one, at least not in the last years — is easily designated: Pioneer American Abstractionist, a role that her talents only partially answered and one that served to further isolate her from the community of artists that came into existence and proliferated as a result of her serious and strenuous efforts.

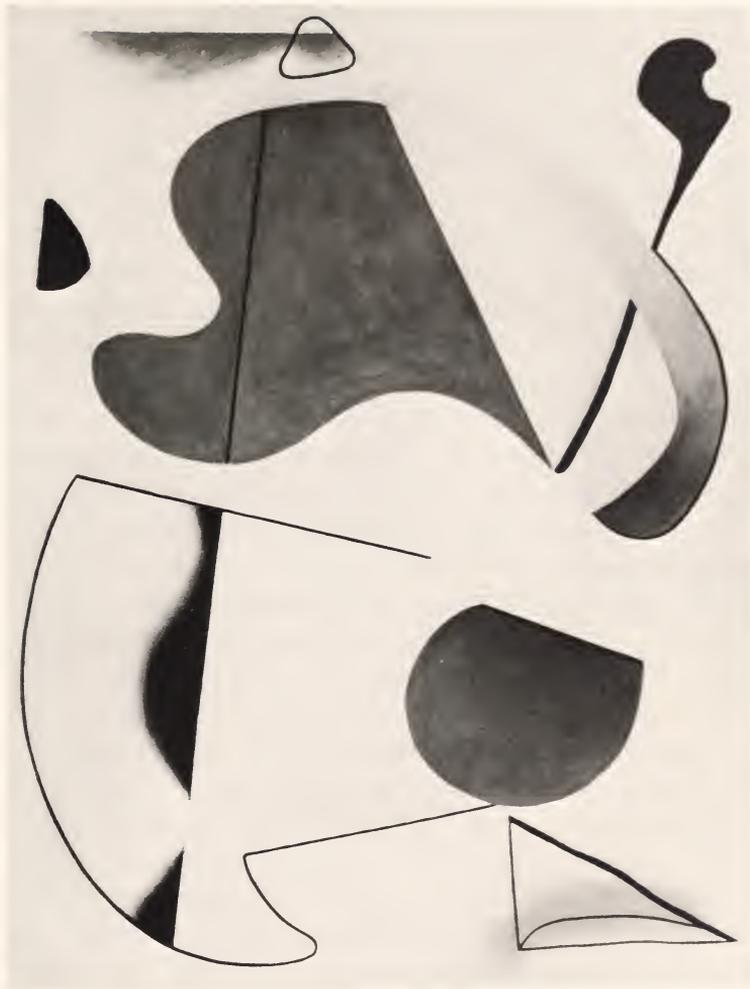
The front page of *The New York Times* for September 22, 1935, reported that of the more than four hundred artists included in the annual Washington Square Art Show, Mason “is the only one showing abstractions.” By that time she had been working in this idiom for some six years.

Born in Litchfield, Connecticut in 1904, she was the fifth child among four sisters and two brothers. Her father, William Trumbull and her mother, Anne Train, were seventh cousins, both of distinguished American lineage. Her father was descended from Jonathan Trumbull, Governor of Connecticut and father of John Trumbull, the finest American history painter of the late Georgian era, excepting Benjamin West. William Trumbull himself came from a family of Protestant missionaries who evangelized as far afield as Valparaiso. Mason's mother, distantly related to Governor William Bradford, came from a family of early conservationists. Certainly the ability to accept the rejection of an apathetic or hostile environment was strengthened by these models.

In her youth there were sojourns in Bermuda and Guernsey in the Channel Islands. During the winter of 1921-22, the Trumbull children, then in their teens, spent the winter in Italy with their parents. Photo albums record a life reminiscent of a novel by Edith Wharton or Henry James. At this time Mason began to paint at the British Academy in Rome, returning to New York to study with the influential painter and teacher Charles Hawthorne. Her long association with the abstract painters Esphyr Slobodkina and Ilya Bolotowsky dates from that time. A few early canvases — figure studies, portraits — executed in Hawthorne's broad Manet-based stroke, gather dust in the artist's West Side studio.

Stylistic shifts are difficult to pinpoint. There is at present scant documentation of Mason's evolution. A photograph of a painting done in 1929 carries the inscription "first abstract painting." At some moment in the late 1920s Mason, I believe, encountered Kandinsky's Murnau landscapes, an exposure that converted her to abstraction of para-landscape motifs. This possible relationship to Kandinsky may have been strengthened through her study with Arshile Gorky, whose attachment to Kandinsky is well-documented. Unlike Kandinsky, however, there is no fulsome color in Mason's first abstractions. The few works of this date are in fact darkly painted, sober colorations tending to heavy linear coils and arching shapes.

In the interim — 1927 — she went to Greece. It may be that these earliest abstractions were vestigial impressions of the Meteora, the mountainous landscape



*The Necessity of Yellow.* 1941. 32 x 24.

of Northern Greece. Certainly she studied Byzantine painting in the Greek churches, and her feeling for geometrical simplification was intensified by travel through the archeological remains of the Cyclades. "There are probably two main-streams of influence in my work: Archaic Greek and Cycladic sculpture and Byzantine mosaics which I studied in Greece and Italy during formative years."<sup>1</sup>

Two other developments of importance took place during this time. Mason discovered poetry and fell in love with a young merchant seaman, Warwood E. Mason, later Captain with the American Export Lines. Her poetry of imagistic and chiselled syntax — as abstract as her painting — would occupy her until the end of her life. These artistic enterprises, however, were scrupulously isolated from an ardent domesticity gratified in marriage. She bore two children, Jonathan, who died in 1958 apparently through accidental drowning (a detail which further clouded Mason's then alien existence) and Emily, now the wife of Wolf Kahn.<sup>2</sup>

Thus from the 1920s on, Mason divided her energies between painting and poetry, going so far as to solicit advice from William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein. Williams was seriously interested; Alice Toklas felt importuned on Gertrude's account: "What are you anyway, some kind of art dealer?" Mason never published. Pages of faceted cryptic word-play lie boxed in the papers of the estate. This poetic strain of mind is reflected in the titles she favored — *Ensorcelled Greys*, *Classic Noctuber*, *Recapitulations*, etc.

For the abstract artist in America the '30s was a period otherwise dominated by Surrealism, American Scene painting and academicism. Mason was a charter member of the American Abstract Artists group and served the organization in various capacities ranging from president to secretary. It goes without saying that none of these efforts were remunerated. Generally speaking, she came from a circle of painters who were morally prejudiced against economic success.

In 1937 the American Abstract Artists were able to hold their first annual exhibition. The public models, largely European, in support of this development were few indeed. In Europe, *Art Concret*, *Cercle et Carré*, *Abstraction-Création*, *The Circle Group*, had come and gone — or were going, defeated by the advent of

Fascism. In the United States, Albert Gallatin had formed his Museum of Living Art, a collection of modern work then housed at New York University. The Museum of Modern Art had been founded, but its initial exhibitions generally supported what was known as “The School of Paris.” Solomon Guggenheim sustained the Non-Objective movement, particularly as it reflected the Kandinsky-based taste of his collection’s director, Baroness Hilla Rebay.

The American Abstract Artists tended to synthesize movements rather than to adhere to sharp stylistic doctrine. Surrealist-biomorphic shapes were dispersed within a tectonics derived from Mondrian. Burgoyne Diller and Harry Holtzman were the only artists who made strict Mondrianist paintings in the 1930s; the others fused modes. Non-biomorphic Mondrianism did not occur in American painting on a wide front in New York until after Mondrian’s death in 1944.<sup>3</sup>

Mason describes her work of this period as follows: “In painting, I developed through a biomorphic period to straight edges and angles, loosely and popularly called ‘geometric.’ These works spring from the need of a greater potential in governing the allotted space, and at the same time of creating a lyrical statement.”<sup>4</sup> A specifically geometric style did not emerge in Mason’s painting until about 1944. At the time she was also working at Atelier 17, as she had become interested in the wide possibilities open to soft-ground etching and aquatint, in time an important aspect of her entire production.

In the main, however, the joint modes — biomorphism and Mondrianism — existed side by side in Mason’s work. Around 1960 there emerged a sharp, “tri-angulated” style. The acute triangles of these paintings function as trinitarian symbols, part of a strong revival of mysticism and Neo-Platonism probably occasioned by the death of her son. But certainly, this is too narrow a reading. In broader terms Mason’s painting reflects a severe New England meditateness, at once resilient and delicate. In certain works, especially the pale geometrical paintings of the last years, one senses a kind of chaste power in strong contrast to her activist, even bohemian, personal history — one which seems to reflect the transcendentalist traditions of her Yankee family. Formats were always modest by

today's standards, especially so in the graphic production — small worlds in which the ordering process is worked out with control and conciseness.

As a human achievement, Mason's work is exemplary. Executed in virtual isolation, she pursued her work with no thought to public approval. In the '60s, Mason tended more and more to be reclusive, an isolation intensified by the prevailing currents of the art scene which were so antithetical to the artist's highly private and spiritually austere sensibility. At the end there was no public recognition and no monetary reward. The West Side flat in which Alice Trumbull Mason was found dead in 1971, at the age of sixty-seven, had once been a scene of cloistered intellectual activity, but now seemed inhabited only by loneliness.

Once, in the '60s, at an evening session of "The Club," Ad Reinhardt (also a veteran of those early struggles) caught a glimpse of Mason at the edge of the audience. Turning to where he believed she was, he admonished the crowd: "Were it not for Alice Trumbull Mason, we would not be here nor in such strength." But she had already left the room.

Robert Pincus-Witten

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup>Reply by Alice Trumbull Mason (June 23, 1953) to a query (June 14, 1953) by Dore Ashton, then associate editor of *Arts Digest*. This short statement of influence and doctrine appears to be unique in Alice Trumbull Mason's papers, available in microfilm at the Archives of American Art.

<sup>2</sup>It was through Wolf Kahn's efforts that Mason had a one-woman show (May 1959) at the Hansa Gallery, the early New York City cooperative founded by students of

Hans Hofmann in the early 1950s. This was one of the rare one-woman exhibitions of her life. Ironically, and this only underscores an important difficulty of her life-choice, such exhibitions were referred to until recently as "one-man shows."

<sup>3</sup>See Robert Pincus-Witten, "Mondrian and Mondrianists," catalog essay, *Post-Mondrian Abstraction in America* (Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, 1973).

<sup>4</sup>See footnote 1.



*L'Hasard*. 1948. 36½ x 28⅞.

## Catalog

All paintings are lent by the Washburn Gallery, New York, unless otherwise noted. All dimensions are in inches, height preceding width. All are oil on canvas unless otherwise specified.

1. *Free White Spacing*. 1938. 22 x 27.
2. *Forms Evoked*. 1940. 17 x 22.
3. *Relation to Field*. 1940. 15¼ x 23¾.
4. *The Necessity of Yellow*. 1941.  
Oil on board. 32 x 24.
5. *#9*. 1941.  
Oil on board. 33½ x 33½.
6. *Untitled*. 1941. 25 x 30.
7. *White Appearing*. 1942.  
Oil on board. 12 x 17.
8. *Axial Black*. 1948.  
Oil on pressed wood. 28 x 23¾.
9. *Cardinal Yellow*. 1948.  
Oil on masonite. 27 x 23½.
10. *L'Hasard*. 1948. 36½ x 28¾.
11. *Black Magnet*. 1949. 20½ x 20.
12. *Fire Festival*. 1951.  
Oil on rayon. 18 x 20.
13. *Magnetic Field*. 1951.  
Oil on orlon canvas. 41¼ x 32¼.
14. *The Seed is White*. 1951.  
Oil on pressed wood. 24 x 24.
15. *Pinwheel Dance*. 1953. 30 x 36.
16. *The Strawberry Hedge*. 1955. 24¼ x 22½.
17. *Pale Column*. 1956. 15 x 22.
18. *Tangerine Trajectory*. 1956. 29 x 35¾.  
Lent by CIBA-GEIGY Corporation,  
Ardsley, N.Y.
19. *Broken Cadence*. 1957. 14 x 10.
20. *Annunciation*. 1958. 18 x 20.
21. *Surface Winds*. 1959. 36 x 30.
22. *Magnitude of Frequencies*. 1960. 31¼  
x 20¼.
23. *White Fulcrum*. 1961. 30 x 42.
24. *Magnitude of Memory*. 1962. 36 x 26.
25. *Rememberance*. 1962. 16 x 20.
26. *Dark Pressure*. 1963. 33 x 40.
27. *Saffron Pitch*. 1963. 36 x 30.
28. *86th St. High #2*. 1967. 34 x 28.
29. *Trinity #9 The Indeterminate Square*.  
1967. 15 x 18.
30. *Paradox #10 Chiaroscuro*. 1968. 16  
x 18.
31. *Trinity #3*. 1968. 16 x 18.
32. *Trinity #4, Towards the Sensuous*.  
1968. 38 x 30.
33. *Trinity #7*. 1968. 29¼ x 37.
34. *#1 Towards a Paradox*. 1969. 19 x 22.
35. *Paradox #5*. 1969. 16 x 16
36. *Paradox #8 Theme of Rectangles*.  
1969. 16 x 18.
37. *Trinity #10*. 1969. 16¼ x 18.
38. *Trinity #11 Supporting Angles*. 1969.  
18 x 15.
39. *Urban White*. 1969. 18 x 28.

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### Whitney Museum of American Art

945 Madison Avenue  
New York, N.Y. 10021  
Telephone (212) 249-4100

Photographs: Geoffrey Clements, John D. Schiff.



*Cover: Surface Winds. 1959. 36 x 30.*

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