



Charlotte Park

SPANIERMAN MODERN



C. Park

Tara (DETAIL OF CAT. 10)
COVER **Parade** (DETAIL OF CAT. 2)

Published in the United States of America in 2007 by
Spanierman Modern, 53 East 58th Street, New York, NY 10022.

Copyright © 2007 Spanierman Modern.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may
be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior
permission of the publishers.

ISBN 0-945936-85-0

Design: Amy Pyle, Light Blue Studio
Photography: Roz Akin
Imaging: Center Page Inc.
Lithography: Meridian Printing

Charlotte Park

JANUARY 10-FEBRUARY 2, 2008

SPANIERMAN MODERN

53 EAST 58TH STREET NEW YORK, NY 10022-1617 TEL (212) 832-1400 WWW.SPANIERMANMODERN.COM

In October of 2002 the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton, New York, held an exhibition of the paintings of Charlotte Park, examining her Abstract Expressionist works of the 1950s. Organized by curator Alicia Longwell, the show received enthusiastic reviews, including one in the *New York Times* by Helen A. Harrison, director of the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center in East Hampton, New York and a noted expert on Abstract Expressionism, who observed that this period in Park's art had not "been seen in depth for many years," and that the show confirmed Park's "status as a New York School Abstractionist of the first rank."¹

The belated attention to Park was further afforded in the exhibition of her Abstract Expressionist paintings created from 1950 to 1963, which was held in May 2006 at Spanierman Gallery at East Hampton, as well as in the show entitled *Long Island Abstraction, 1950s to the Present*, shown at the same venue in November 2006, in which Park was included. A result of the latter show, as well as of other exhibitions in recent years, has been an awareness of the important contribution of women painters to the Abstract Expressionist movement, which has usually been construed as a male-only phenomenon, emanating from the circle of artists around Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning and springing from their raucous gatherings at Greenwich Village's Cedar Bar. In the background, or considered as mainly important only for the support they gave to their husbands, such

artists as Elaine de Kooning and Park were given little attention for their own work, while Betty Parsons, who was also a devoted artist with a penetrating vision, was known only for her role as an art dealer, her art taking a backseat to her promotional activities, which helped launch and establish the notoriety of the male painters whose work she exhibited. Indeed, with a recent exploration of the work of these women in exhibitions and catalogues, their important contribution to the New York School is becoming apparent, while their art is receiving attention for the distinctiveness of each of their approaches.

In the case of Park, who was almost virtually unrecognized until after the death of her husband James Brooks in 1992, the existence of her work came as a surprise, as is reflected in Benjamin Genocchio's review in the *New York Times* of the 2006 show of Long Island abstractions, in which he remarked that "Ms. Park's works are a revelation, for she is little known and began to draw attention only after the death of her husband, the painter James Brooks, in 1992. Her all-over compositions with messy blocky shapes covering the entire paper have a tremendous vitality and energy. She is also a great colorist."² Since that time Park was also included in *Picturing Long Island: Abstract, Figurative, and Historical*, an exhibition held at the Heckscher Museum of Art, Huntington, Long Island, in February–March 2007.

The current exhibition provides a further opportunity to observe the unique qualities

of Park's work and determine her role within the dynamic milieu in which she participated. However, it will not be until a full consideration of all of the artists whose efforts were manifested in the growth of the first entirely original American art movement that its history can be fully understood.

Park's dynamic all-over style of composition, with its rich repertory of abstract shapes and bold imaginings, which made its appearance in the early 1950s, demonstrated how profoundly well she understood the character of Abstract Expressionism as it was originating. Her art of this time reveals her inspired interpretation of the movement's defining ideas of pure painting and its use as a means of reshaping reality and discovering the essence of form and content.

Beginning with her work of the early 1950s, Park put a personal stamp on Abstract Expressionism. The irregular shapes appearing in these works that would evolve into a central feature of her painterly vocabulary, have as a general antecedent, the animated forms in the emergent Abstract Expressionist paintings of the late 1940s, found, for example, in the work of Mark Rothko. The paintings in gouache that she created in the mid-1950s, in which references to nature on eastern Long Island appear, are revealing of the emblematic kinds of meaning with which she endowed her shapes. The wavy lines and twisty organic shapes in her works can be seen as the marks of a lively and commanding gestural hand when they are examined individually. Seen sweeping across the brilliant surfaces of a number of the paintings in gouache of the mid-1950s, they

can also be taken as the fascinatingly reductive signs of the ocean, bay, and countryside of Long Island. In these works Park reveals her peerless control of the gouache medium in exhilarating combinations of black and white and colors such as red, brown, and yellow.

Park was born in 1918 in Concord, Massachusetts. After a childhood spent in the Pacific Northwest, where her stepfather worked for the forestry service, Park attended the Yale School of Fine Art in New Haven, Connecticut, from which she graduated in 1939. The subsequent phase of her career was shaped by World War II, which the United States entered in 1941. In that year, Park joined other young women graduates of her generation as a volunteer in Washington, D.C., where she worked first for the department of Federal Public Housing and then lent her skills in graphic work to the OSS, the Office of Strategic Services, a special agency that produced intelligence, analysis and planning in support of overseas Allied military operations. Occupied with her work on behalf of the war effort, Park created little art work during her Washington years.

Park met James Brooks in Washington, D.C. in 1945 through a friend of his who was working with her at the OSS. Brooks had recently returned from a military assignment in North Africa as a war artist. Both artists soon relocated to New York, where in the late 1920s, Brooks, along with Krasner and Pollock and other avant-garde artists, had taken part in the progressive group based at the Art Students League. After moving to New York, Park found an apartment on Gramercy Park and took night classes in

Cubism, along with Helen Frankenthaler, from Wallace Harrison, a French-trained artist. In 1949 she accepted a position teaching art at Leonard School for Girls. She also taught at a number of art schools and at the Museum of Modern Art, which deepened her understanding of currents in twentieth-century modernism.

Park and Brooks were married in 1947, and two years later they established studios in Montauk, Long Island. Afterwards they lived in The Springs, East Hampton, where Park continues to reside.

Watching the New York School unfold, Park demonstrated her integral part in this emergence, launching her own version of Abstract Expressionism within three years. By 1952 she had begun to show her work, participating in an invitational show at Peridot, a contemporary New York gallery. A review of the exhibition in *Artnews* gave recognition to a “black, maize and pink” painting she displayed. In the next year, she was represented in the painting annual of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, which constituted her first important museum exhibition. In 1954 Park participated in *Fifteen Artists of the Region*, an exhibition at Guild Hall in East Hampton, New York, which also included works by Franz Kline, Joan Mitchell, and Larry Rivers. Stuart Preston, in a review of the show in *New York Times* praised Park as a ‘high-spirited colorist.’³

When Park’s work was displayed in 1955 at Tanager Gallery in New York—which showcased artists on the leading edge—her organization of color was highlighted in a *Village Voice* article, while Dore Ashton

stated in a *New York Times* review of a show held the following year: “Among paintings, there are notable abstractions by Charlotte Park, who shows a strong black-and-white.”⁴ During the 1950s Park participated in annuals and group shows at Stable Gallery in New York and Signa Gallery in East Hampton, both of which had significant Abstract Expressionist ties.

Park’s one-person exhibition at Tanager in November 1957 prompted enthusiastic responses. Ashton wrote in the *New York Times* that Park’s “recent abstractions . . . are crisp, well-composed works, moving close to the surface of the canvas. Some are very active in movement, suggesting a flooding openness, as if her theme were the sea. Others are more quiet, with resounding forms in orange or red held in a rich black matrix. By scraping, building up and revisiting, Miss Park has achieved a varied, sensuously appealing surface.”⁵

The awareness that Park’s art deserved greater attention than it had during the era of Abstract Expressionism began to be acknowledged in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Park was among the artists chosen to be represented in the exhibition, *Around Jackson Pollock, East Hampton, 1946–55: 15 Abstract Expressionists*, which was held in Paris at the American Cultural Center in the fall of 1979. Flora Lewis, who reviewed the exhibition for the *New York Times*, remarked that the show “situates the movement and gives a sense of its spread,” while noting that the painters, chosen to represent Pollock’s circle by Virginia Zabriskie, included Ibram Lassaw, de Kooning, Franz Kline, Robert

Motherwell, Alfonso Ossorio, Ludwig Sander, Brooks, and Park.⁶ In the following year, Park was featured in *The Pollock Years*, held at the Parrish Art Museum, that focused on art from the years 1946 to 1956, a period described in the *Times* by David Shirey as “the best and most golden of American art history.” Of the artists whose work was on view, including Kline, Motherwell, and Brooks, Shirey singled Park out along with Linda Lindeberg, a creator of enamels on paper, as “artists who have had less attention in recent years,” whose work made a “splendid showing.” He wrote that “Park’s runic strokes of light colors and light are full of interesting pictorial tensions.”⁷ In the following year, when the Louis Himelfarb Gallery in New York opened a joint exhibition of the works of Brooks and Park, Helen Harrison explored the differences in the work of husband and wife, observing in the *Times*: “Both artists are expressing energy, but in different ways. Miss Park’s is the lively crackle of static or a loose-jointed, laidback version of Mondrian’s boogie-woogie. She combines whimsicality and architectonic structure in the manner of Paul Klee, injecting the abstracted result with the confined dynamism of his ‘Twittering Machine.’”⁸

Expanded by Lisa N. Peters, Ph.D., from Ronny Cohen, Ph.D., *Charlotte Park: Abstract Expressionist Painting, 1950–63*, Spanierman Gallery at East Hampton, brochure, 2006.

1. Helen A. Harrison, “Art Reviews: Landscapes of Fantasy, and a Devotion to Color,” *New York Times*, December 8, 2002, 21.
2. Benjamin Genocchio, “Sand, Sea and Abstraction,” *New York Times*, November 26, 2006, L1 12.
3. Stuart Preston, “Both Old and New: Exhibitions at Yonkers and East Hampton,” *New York Times*, August 8, 1954, X8.
4. D[ore] A[shton], “Group Display at Tanager Gallery,” *New York Times*, November 16, 1956, 20.
5. D[ore] A[shton], “Art: Gallery Pot-Pourri: Recent Abstractions by Charlotte Park Among Work on Exhibition Here,” *New York Times*, November 8, 1957, 32.
6. Flora Lewis, “Two Paris Shows à la Pollock,” *New York Times*, October 3, 1979, 31.
7. David L. Shirey, “The Image of a Momentous Era,” *New York Times*, September 7, 1980, L1 14.
8. Helen A. Harrison, “Art: Married Artists’ Own Style,” *New York Times*, August 23, 1981, L1 25.

The current exhibition delves further into an exploration of Park's stylistic trajectory. Among the works included are a group of small paintings created in the early 1950s. These are mainly gouache on paper, some in color and others limited to black and white. A choice of many of New York's advanced artists at this time, the elimination of color had the virtue of freeing artists from the demands imposed by the palette. For Park, working in monochrome meant that she could be free to concentrate on bolder, highly contrasted, and clearly defined images and to arrange them in extremely shallow and sometimes ambiguous post-Cubist spaces. This approach also allowed her to invent an original vocabulary of geometric and organic shapes and to compose them over the whole surface of the work so that interest in the image is dispersed. Having not yet arrived at a signature image, in these works she still alternated between geometric and curvilinear forms, favoring neither. A comparison can be made, for example, between *Masque* and *Untitled (Black and White IV)*. The former is exceptional in that it is one of only two works in this group that is painted and specifically titled. In fact, Park seldom titled her works, but when she did, the names she chose were less referential to people, places, or events than they were evocations of the feelings that an image aroused. In *Masque*, shunning the straight lines and planar directness of *Untitled* demonstrated her predisposition to rounded shapes and complex, curved forms with which she sought to capture the mysterious

implications of a masque ball. Works such as these mark her debut as a mature artist.

The show also consists of other works Park began to create in the early 1950s, in which she introduced color and probed its possibilities. She continued to use gouache on paper, but where her concept required an impastoed surface, she turned to oil. A skilled colorist, Park seems to have chosen a single pure color, which she used at full intensity and then paired it with another hue while retaining brushy white areas like those in her earlier works. In one series, she explored ultramarine with red, then with green, and then with black. In another group she celebrated the alliance of carmine red with gold to achieve radiance. Despite her avoidance of titles with explicit meanings, in a work she named *The Sun*, Park perhaps took pleasure in her success at joining two colors that create a dazzling effect. At the same time, her brushwork in this image is more relaxed, and the new larger shapes here somehow reconcile the organic-geometric extremes. In their greater use of black as either outline or plane, Park's paintings of this early period, such as *Untitled (Red, Pink, Orange, and Black)* and *Untitled (Red, Yellow, Orange, and Black)*, suggest how she would manage color in future works.

Park's greater confidence as she moved into the mid-1950s is reflected in her production of works that were larger, more ambitious, and in subtle ways more complex. She chose mostly to paint in oil on canvas and expanded her color range as well as the size of her color planes. She replaced pure

hues with modulated ones. Again her works are of two dispositions. Some are rich, with cursive lines we ponder, only to realize the cursive lines' bounding areas echo nature. They recall the sinuous contours of a cloud, the appearance of furled leaves rustled by a breeze, or traces of human form. Others are rich in rectilinear shapes. In these, there is a predilection for emphasizing the verticality of forms. In both she used hotter, more impassioned colors than she had earlier. One of her favorite combinations was alizarin crimson shouldered by brilliant orange or pink, the whole seemingly intensified by planes of cerulean blue or black. Together these colors glow with particular intensity. These works reveal the boldness of Park's choices and allow us to take note of her sure touch in deploying paint with both brush and palette knife. Her use of them in tandem fashioned tactile and varied surfaces.

The inventiveness that emanated from these images inspired Park to investigate another art form. In the second half of the decade, she turned to collage as had her contemporaries Lee Krasner and Conrad Marca-Relli. She took a distinctive approach to this form. Instead of the method of the Cubists and Dadaists, whose collages were fashioned of random newsprint, wrappers, and the debris of real life, Park culled her earlier works for passages of color or brushwork she found interesting. She then cut them apart and gave them new life by arranging them in a new context. The resulting compositions retain their two-dimensionality, with nearly all the illusionistic space squeezed from them, although the

pasted papers on successive planes hint at variable pictorial depths. In keeping with her aesthetic, these newly minted images are abstract but have a stringency lacking in Krasner's Matisse-inspired forms or in Marca-Relli's ephemeral human ones.

The collages have another value, however. Their abutting planes, varied in every way, opened a vista that the artist explored in the 1960s. Three works in the exhibition reveal this trajectory, two that are untitled, and one called *Tara*. Far from the earnestness of her earliest works as well as from the dignified images of the mid-fifties works, these new images are platonic in their square format and soft and sensuous in their mixture of pure color with luminous blended hues. Later in life, Park evinced an avid interest in Mondrian's Neo-plasticism, an association to which Helen Harrison gave recognition in 1981. One wonders if this interest was already latent and how much it inspired the overall shape of these works and the notion of a geometricized pictorial field. However, different from her earlier images in these later ones, the colors whisper and shout. Her vision is at once more poetic and more joyous, leading to the works of the next phase of her career, to be explored in another exhibition. While reflecting many strains within the abstract art of her time, these works also reveal Park's development of an individualist expressive identity, which deserves a place of its own in the history of the art of her time.

Anne Abeles, Ph.D.







1.

The Sun

OIL ON PAPER MOUNTED ON CANVAS, 18 × 24 IN.

DETAIL ON PRECEDING PAGES



2.

Parade

OIL ON PAPER MOUNTED ON CANVAS, 18 × 24 IN.



3.

Zachary

OIL ON CANVAS, 36 × 47 IN.



4.

Untitled (Red, Blue, and White)

GOUACHE ON PAPER, 18 × 24 IN.



5.

Untitled (Green, Yellow, and White)

GOUACHE ON PAPER, 18 × 24 IN.



6.

Untitled (Red, Orange, Blue, and Pink)

OIL ON CANVAS, 57 × 36 IN.



7.

Untitled

COLLAGE ON PAPER, 22½ × 28½ IN.



8.

Untitled (Red, Pink, Orange, and Black)

OIL ON CANVAS, 36½ × 28½ IN.



9.

Initiation

OIL ON CANVAS, 46 × 36 IN.



10.

Tara

OIL ON CANVAS, 34 × 34 IN.



11.

Masque

OIL ON CANVAS, 18 × 24 IN.



12.

Blue Warning

OIL ON CANVAS, 32³/₄ × 34³/₄ IN.



13.

#10

OIL ON CANVAS, 17³/₄ × 17 IN.

Checklist

- #10**
1953
Oil on canvas
27 × 38 inches
- #10 (Cat. 13)**
1954
Oil on canvas
17¾ × 17 inches
- #25**
1951
Oil on canvas
37 × 46 inches
- Aztec**
ca. 1955
Oil on canvas
22 × 13 inches
- Blue Warning (Cat. 12)**
ca. 1953
Oil on canvas
32¾ × 34¾ inches
- Departure**
mid-1950s
Oil on canvas
36 × 45 inches
- Initiation (Cat. 9)**
mid-1950s
Oil on canvas
46 × 36 inches
- Masque (Cat. 11)**
early 1950s
Oil on canvas
18 × 24 inches
- Parade (Cat. 2)**
mid-1950s
Oil on paper mounted on canvas
18 × 24 inches
- Peterboro**
1955
Oil on canvas
24 × 30 inches
- The Sun (Cat. 1)**
early 1950s
Oil on paper mounted on canvas
18 × 24 inches
- Tara (Cat. 10)**
1960
Oil on canvas
34 × 34 inches
- Untitled**
1952
Gouache on paper
15 × 21 inches
- Untitled**
late 1950s
Oil on canvas
50 × 50 inches
- Untitled (Cat. 7)**
1950–95
Collage on paper
22½ × 28½ inches
- Untitled**
early 1960s
Oil on canvas
50 × 50 inches
- Untitled (Black and Gray II)**
ca. 1950s
Gouache on paper
8¹⁵/₁₆ × 11¹/₁₆ inches
- Untitled (Black and White)**
early 1950s
Oil and gouache on paper
mounted on canvas
14⁷/₈ × 18 inches
- Untitled (Blue, Black, and White)**
ca. 1950s
Gouache on paper
18 × 24 inches
- Untitled (Blue, Green, and White)**
ca. 1950s
Gouache on paper
18 × 24 inches
- Untitled (Blue, Green, and White)**
ca. 1950s
Gouache on paper
17¾ × 23½ inches
- Untitled (Blue, Yellow, and Green)**
mid-1950s
Gouache on paper
17¾ × 23½ inches
- Untitled (Color Collage)**
mid-1950s
Gouache on paper collage
17¾ × 23½ inches
- Untitled (Green, Yellow, and White) (Cat. 5)**
ca. 1950s
Gouache on paper
18 × 24 inches
- Untitled (Red, Blue, and White) (Cat. 4)**
ca. 1950s
Gouache on paper
18 × 24 inches
- Untitled (Red, Orange, and White)**
ca. 1950s
Gouache on paper
18 × 24 inches
- Untitled (Red, Orange, Blue, and Pink) (Cat. 6)**
ca. 1950s
Oil on canvas
57 × 36 inches
- Untitled (Red, Pink, Orange, and Black) (Cat. 8)**
ca. 1950s
Oil on canvas
36½ × 28½ inches
- Untitled (Red, White, and Green)**
mid-1950s
Oil on paper mounted on canvas
18 × 24 inches
- Untitled (Red, Yellow, and White)**
ca. 1950s
Gouache on paper
18 × 24 inches
- Untitled (Red, Yellow, Orange, and Black)**
ca. 1950s
Oil on canvas
24 × 21 inches
- Zachary (Cat. 3)**
1950s–60s
Oil on canvas
36 × 47 inches

For further information please visit our website www.spaniermanmodern.com or contact inquiry@spaniermanmodern.com