



Alice Trumbull Mason

Independent 20th Century

Sotheby's New York, The Breuer
945 Madison Avenue
Third Floor

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Galerie Lelong



Alice Trumbull Mason's late paintings on view at Independent 20th Century constitute a coherent, finite body of work shaped by renewed formal rigor, the advocacy of Richard "Dick" Bellamy, and the institutional recognition that ultimately culminated at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1973. First exhibited during Mason's lifetime at Hansa Gallery and the Green Gallery, these works were later included in her posthumous Whitney retrospective, affirming their central place within a career that balanced European modernist discipline with an unmistakably personal vision. Now, more than 50 years later, the works return to the Breuer building to be reconsidered and reexamined.

Born in Litchfield, Connecticut, in 1904, Mason came to abstraction gradually. During a family trip to Europe in the early 1920s, she studied at the British Academy in Rome, an experience that exposed her to modernist currents beyond the American academic tradition. After returning to New York in 1924, she continued her studies with Charles Hawthorne at the National Academy of Design, where she developed a strong technical foundation. A decisive shift came several years later, when she studied with Arshile Gorky at the Grand Central School of Art. Reflecting on that period, Mason later noted that Gorky "really opened my eyes to abstract painting," even though, as she observed, "he himself wasn't very strongly abstract at that time." By the end of the decade, she had made her first abstract painting and committed herself fully to non-objective work. Her early conviction was evident publicly by the mid-1930s, when she participated in the Washington Square Art Show as the sole exhibitor of abstract painting among more than four hundred artists. In 1936, she cofounded the American Abstract Artists (AAA) group, which staged annual exhibitions and famously protested the Museum of Modern Art's Eurocentric program that excluded abstraction.

Mason's commitment to abstraction was shaped early by both intellectual ambition and the material constraints of her domestic life. Her husband, Warwood E. Mason, was a sea captain who was frequently at sea during the years when their children were born. During this period, Mason was largely unable to paint, constrained by the demands of childcare and prolonged isolation. Rather than withdrawing from creative production, she turned to writing poetry, developing a parallel practice. Her poems attracted the attention of William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein, situating Mason within a modernist literary milieu and reinforcing her engagement with formal discipline across mediums. This early immersion in poetic structure would later find sustained expression in the measured spatial logic and clarity of her painted work.

From the 1930s into the early 1940s, Mason worked in biomorphism, a mode out of step with the Surrealist dominance of avant-garde discourse and the cultural suspicion of abstraction in the United States. Her encounter with Piet Mondrian in the early 1940s prompted a decisive turn toward geometric rigor. Mason invited Mondrian on behalf of the American Abstract Artists to give a lecture in January 1942, and the two corresponded regularly afterward. Mason's paintings from the 1950s and 1960s are distinguished by disciplined geometry, architectonic clarity, and a resistance to expressive excess. Unlike her Abstract Expressionist contemporaries, she pursued an abstract language grounded in balance, proportion, and spatial tension rather than gesture or psychological projection. During this period, the triangle emerged as a recurring and structurally dominant form in her work, organizing pictorial space through a sense of equilibrium and ascent. This formal turn coincided with a profound personal rupture following the death of her son, Jo, in 1958, and reflected a renewed spiritual orientation in her practice. Her compositions, constructed from interlocking planes and calibrated color relationships, drew on European modernism, particularly Constructivism and early abstraction, while remaining unmistakably her own. Abstraction, for Mason, functioned not only as a formal discipline but as a spiritual pursuit, a means of order, continuity, and transcendence.

Around 1957, Mason met Richard Bellamy, whose recognition of the seriousness and conviction of her work proved decisive. In 1959, Mason had a one-person exhibition at Hansa Gallery, an artist-run space organized as a cooperative alternative to the commercial gallery system. Bellamy's subsequent founding of the Green Gallery extended this relationship. Mason participated in group exhibitions there in 1961 and again in 1965, reinforcing Bellamy's continued advocacy for her work and situating her paintings within a lineage that bridged prewar abstract painting and the emergent languages of Minimalism and Conceptualism.

Mason maintained a steady institutional presence throughout her career, most notably through her relationship with the Whitney Museum, which spanned more than three decades. She was included in the Whitney *Annual Exhibition* in 1938, 1953, and 1955, and her work was later featured in the landmark group exhibition *Geometric Abstraction in America* in 1962, to which Bellamy loaned a painting of Mason's. This sustained engagement culminated in a posthumous retrospective at the Whitney Museum's Breuer Building in 1973, affirming the coherence and enduring relevance of her contribution to American abstraction.

Presented at the Breuer Building, where Mason received her most comprehensive institutional recognition in 1973, this selection foregrounds the late work shaped by Bellamy's support and Mason's renewed formal rigor. By concentrating on a period that was insufficiently recognized during Mason's lifetime, the presentation addresses structural omissions that have shaped the historical reception of women artists within twentieth-century abstraction.



City Twilight, 1955–56
Oil on canvas
19 x 24 in (48.3 x 61 cm)
GL17495

\$ 130,000



Open Harbor, 1956

Oil on canvas

14 x 21 in (35.6 x 53.3 cm)

GL17496

\$ 125,000

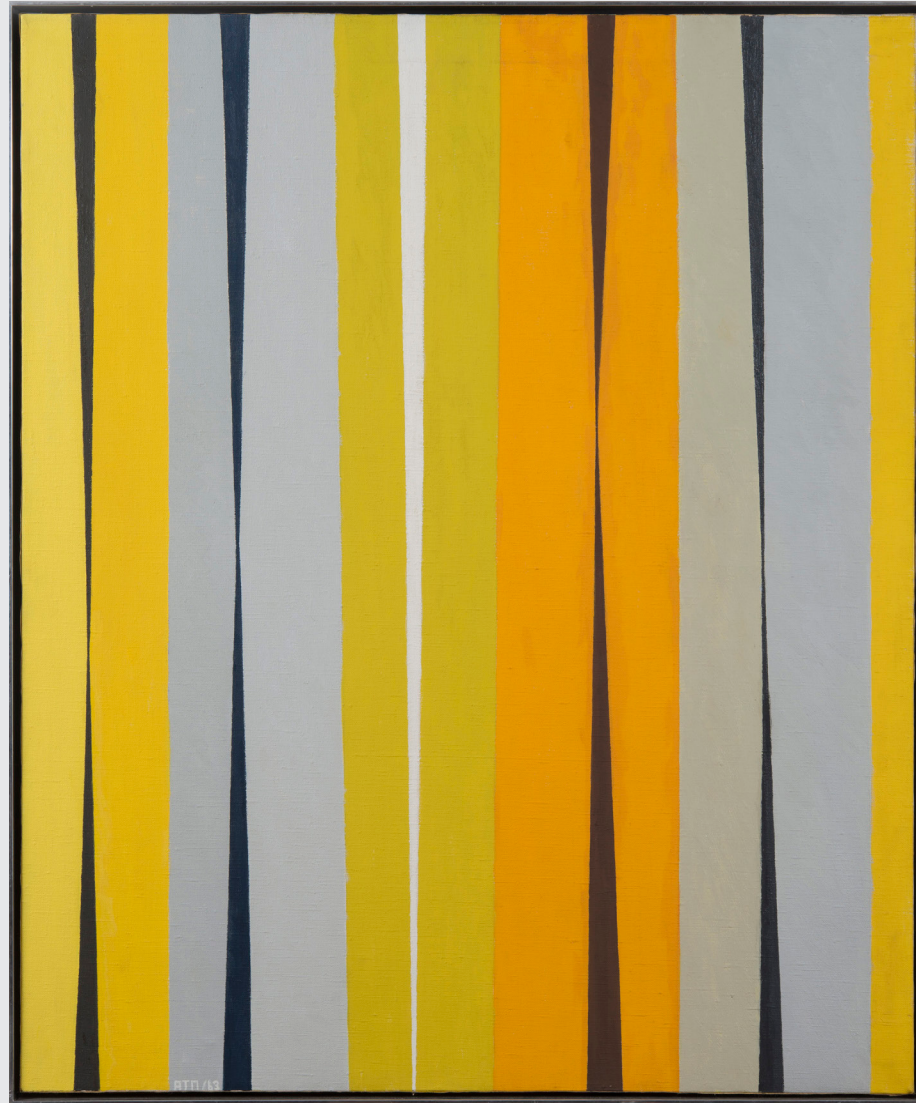




Dark Pressure, 1963
Oil on canvas
24 x 44 in (61 x 111.8 cm)
GL17320

\$ 175,000





The Saffron Pitch, 1963

Oil on canvas

36 x 30 in (91.4 x 76.2 cm)

GL17321

\$ 165,000





Wind Gauge, 1963

Oil on canvas

24 x 30 in (61 x 76.2 cm)

GL17319

\$ 150,000



Sprung Rhythm, 1963

Oil on canvas

16 x 12 in (40.6 x 30.5 cm)

GL17502

\$ 115,000



Scale of Diamonds, 1963

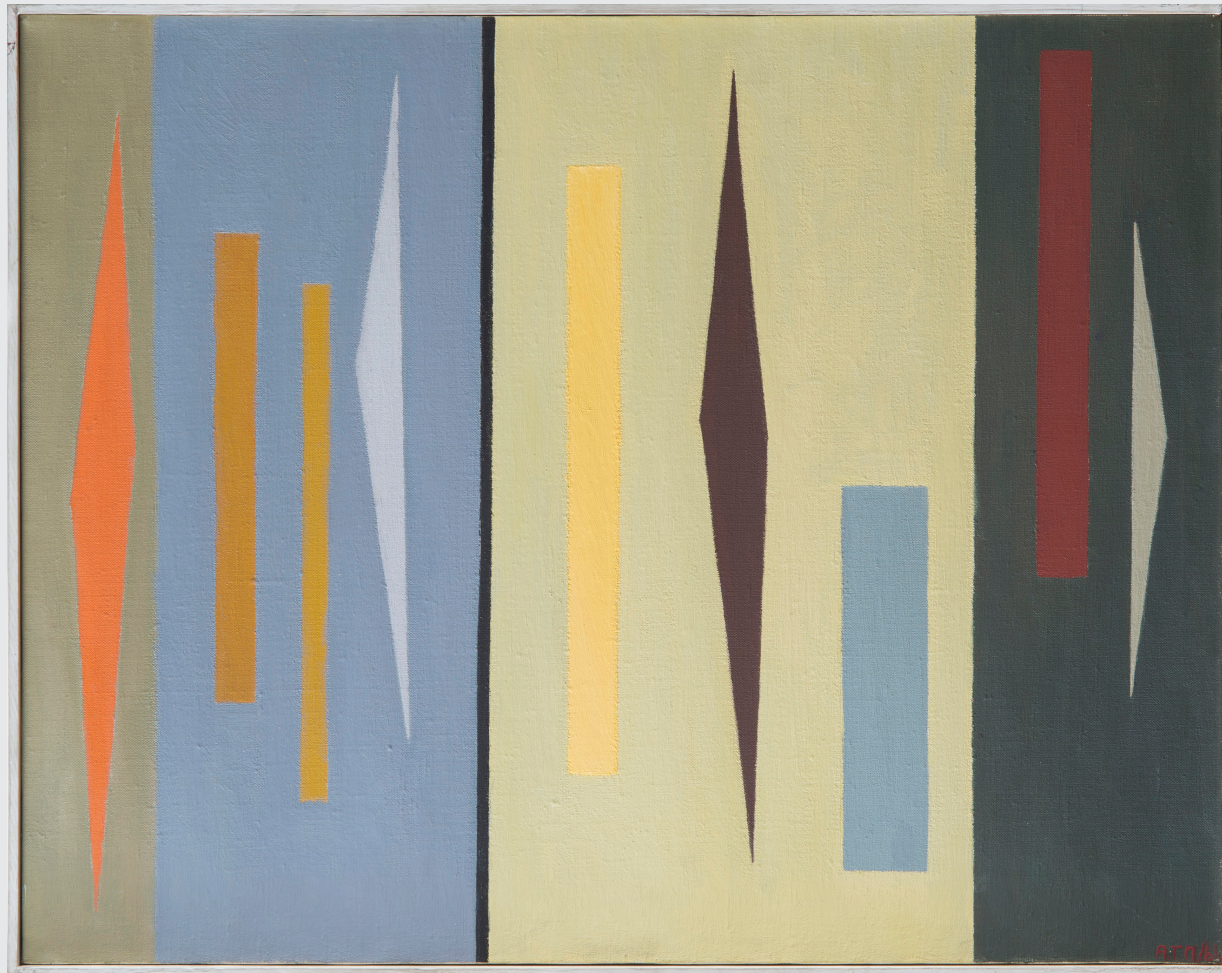
Oil on canvas

19 x 16 in (48.3 x 40.6 cm)

GL17501

\$ 115,000





Measure of Changes, 1964

Oil on canvas

22 x 28 in (55.9 x 71.1 cm)

GL17507

\$ 135,000



Alice Trumbull Mason

Born 1904 in Litchfield, Connecticut; Died 1971 in New York City

- 1904** Alice Trumbull is born in Litchfield, Connecticut, on November 16, the fifth of six children of Anne Leavenworth Train and William Trumbull. Her older sister Margaret Jennings later recalls that “what Alice wanted to do, you know that the family did it.”
- 1920** Trumbull travels with her family to Italy, first living in Fiesole, outside Florence, then in Rome, where she attends the British Academy of Arts.
- 1923** Trumbull and her parents move to New York City. She enrolls in Charles W. Hawthorne’s classes at the National Academy of Design.
- 1925–26** Over four months, Trumbull travels on a world cruise with her aunt Anne Trumbull, with stops in Cuba, Panama, Hawaii, Japan, China, India, and Egypt. She keeps a detailed illustrated journal of the trip.
- 1927** Trumbull returns to her training with Hawthorne at the National Academy of Design, where she befriends the artists Ilya Bolotowsky and Esphyr Slobodkina.
- 1928** Trumbull attends the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, then studies under Arshile Gorky at the Grand Central School of Art. “He really opened my eyes to abstract painting,” she recalls, “even though he himself wasn’t very strongly abstract at that time.” Traveling in Italy and Greece with her sister Margaret, she meets Warwood Mason aboard the *Coeur d’Alene*, where he serves as second mate.
- 1929** In New York, Trumbull takes a studio and paints her first abstractions, inspired by her recent travels. In a letter to Warwood she describes her dedication to art: “I know that the whole of life is declaring and manifesting good ...my works show forth, manifest, prove, because the foundation is unity.”
- 1930** In January, Trumbull’s mother, a devoted Christian Scientist, dies after refusing medical treatment, an event that reshapes her daughter’s view of religion: “Mysticism became too shallow a thing,” she later writes, “and I turned to a keen religious asceticism.” She marries Warwood Mason that December, taking his name.

- 1931** The Masons move to Grove Street in the West Village. Mason corresponds with Gertrude Stein, who reads her poetry and encourages her to publish; *Pagany* prints her poem "Trees" that winter alongside work by William Carlos Williams and Stein.
- 1932–1934** Daughter Emily is born in January 1932, followed by son Jonathan, known as Jo, in November 1933; Jo is born with a cleft lip and a heart murmur, and Warwood's long absences at sea leave Mason to manage largely alone. Her father dies in January 1933. She resumes painting regularly in 1934, once both children are in nursery school.
- 1935** In September, Mason is the sole abstract painter among more than four hundred exhibitors at the Washington Square Art Show. There she meets the sculptor Ibram Lassaw, who later recalls, "Suddenly I saw her paintings and oh my god, here's a real artist!" The two begin informal gatherings, with Bolotowsky, Slobodkina, and other abstractionists, that lay the groundwork for American Abstract Artists.
- 1936–1937** American Abstract Artists (AAA) is formally founded in 1936, the same year Mason becomes romantically involved with Lassaw and the family moves to Knickerbocker Village. In March 1937 she shows with the AAA at Squibb Gallery for the first time.
- 1938** For the AAA's Squibb Gallery catalogue, Mason writes "Concerning Plastic Significance," arguing that abstraction is "the true realism." That November, her painting *A Drawing in Oil Paint* (1937) is included in the Whitney Museum's *Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting*.
- 1939–1940** Mason serves as AAA treasurer, then, beginning in 1940, as secretary, a post she holds until 1945. That year she joins fellow AAA members, including Josef Albers, Gertrude Greene, and Carl Holty, in picketing the Museum of Modern Art over its exclusion of American abstractionists from three major surveys. Hilla Rebay, director of the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, begins supporting Mason with a monthly stipend for materials, in exchange for attendance at her critiques.
- 1941–1942** On behalf of the AAA, Mason invites Piet Mondrian to lecture in New York; the two correspond regularly until his death in 1944. She has her first solo show, at the Museum of Living Art on Washington Square, in November 1942, sponsored by A. E. Gallatin. Warwood's reassignment to a desk post in Newark brings the family together year-round for the first time, and Mason ends her romantic relationship with Lassaw, though the two remain close friends for life.

- 1943** Mason joins the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors and shows in a juried group exhibition at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery. "It is not bad, but heavily surrealistic," she writes to Lassaw of the show.
- 1944–1945** Mason joins Atelier 17, Stanley William Hayter's experimental printmaking studio, and moves to a new studio on East 119th Street. The Guggenheim Museum acquires her painting *Emergent Form* in 1945; after visiting a memorial exhibition for Kandinsky that year, she writes to Rebay describing it as "a real experience for a great number of us."
- 1946–1947** Mason receives the Charles M. Lea Prize from the Print Club of Philadelphia for a soft ground etching. In 1947, curator Una Johnson visits her studio, next door to one used by Joan Miró; that year the Guggenheim acquires *Classic Noctuber*, and *Bearings in Transition* is included in the Art Institute of Chicago's annual exhibition.
- 1948** Mason has a solo show at Rose Fried Gallery and receives the Treasurer's Prize of the Society of American Etchers. Gorky and Bolotowsky, among others, visit her studio.
- 1949** Mason meets Ray Johnson and becomes friendly with John Cage and Merce Cunningham. She becomes a fixture at The Club, the Eighth Street meeting ground for the emerging New York School, whose regulars include Lassaw, Philip Pavia, Elaine and Willem de Kooning, and Franz Kline. Recalling a session years later, at which Mason had already left the room, Ad Reinhardt tells the crowd, "Were it not for Alice Trumbull Mason, we would not be here nor in such strength."
- 1950–1952** Mason takes up wood engraving and shows a solo print exhibition at Wittenborn and Company in 1952, the same year she receives a small prize from the Silvermine Guild of Artists of Connecticut. She has a solo show at Rose Fried Gallery in the fall of 1951, and *Magnetic Field* (1951) appears in the Whitney's *Annual Exhibition*.
- 1953–1954** Mason's painting *Friendships* (1952–1953) is included in the Whitney's final *Annual Exhibition* at its Eighth Street location; of it she writes to Emily that its subject was "the influence of a group of people or forms modifying each other." *Staff*, *Distaff* and *Rod* is shown at the Guggenheim's *Younger American Painters*, and *Slanted Weather* at Bennington College. Mason also teaches art to children at a Police Athletic League center.
- 1955–1956** Brooklyn Museum curator Una Johnson includes Mason in *14 Painter-Printmakers*, which acquires two of her prints for the museum's permanent collection and later tours Europe; *Hurricane House* (1955) appears in the Whitney's *Annual Exhibition*. Jo, who has struggled with addiction since early adulthood, completes a recovery program and, at his father's urging, joins the merchant marine. Emily begins a relationship with the painter Wolf Kahn before moving to Venice on a Fulbright grant that fall.

- 1957** Emily and Wolf marry in Venice in March; Mason and Warwood, at first reluctant, give their blessing ("Except NO BABY SITTING," Mason writes) and visit the couple that September. Of Jo, then at sea with the merchant marine, Mason writes to Emily, "Both of you spring from a home that contains lots of happiness and also elements of tragedy."
- During their stay in Venice, letters to Jo go unanswered, and the family tries, without success, to trace his whereabouts.
- 1958** In early spring, Jo's body is found in Puget Sound, Washington, after five months missing; Mason and Warwood identify him by his dental records, and the family understands his death as a probable suicide. Mason sinks into a severe depression, suffering from malnutrition and alcoholism and undergoing repeated hospitalizations. Emily later recalls taking her to Towns Hospital, a drying-out facility on Central Park West, where a fellow patient, the art dealer Richard Bellamy, briefly lifts the ward's mood when his girlfriend visits with a pet iguana: "She loved Dick Bellamy," Emily says. "She liked, not the absurd, but the irreverent."
- 1959** At Bellamy's instigation, Mason has a solo show at Hansa Gallery, near Columbus Circle, that April. The Whitney acquires *Memorial* (1958–1959), painted in tribute to Jo, for its *New Acquisitions* exhibition. Her first granddaughter, Cecily Kahn, is born in September, and Mason begins a four-year term as president of the AAA.
- 1960–1962** Mason participates in a February 1960 panel discussion at The Club, "The Edge of Painting," moderated by Bolotowsky, and continues to show in the AAA's annual exhibitions, at Lever House and, later, Area Gallery, as well as in a group show at Green Gallery.
- 1963** On Harold Rosenberg's recommendation, Mason's painting *Arctic Summer* (1956) receives New York's Long View Award. She shows with the AAA, the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors, and museums including the Whitney and the Saint Louis Art Museum, and visits Emily and Wolf in Rome that December.
- 1964** Mason's second granddaughter, Melany Kahn, is born in Rome that March. She shows *Vertical Strata* (1963) in the Riverside Museum's *West Side Artists: New York City*.
- 1965–1966** Mason continues to exhibit in group shows, including the thirtieth annual AAA exhibition, the Brooklyn Print Annual, and a show at the Museum of Modern Art.

- 1967** Mason has a survey of fifty paintings at Fire House Gallery in Garden City, New York, and attends the MacDowell Colony for a second time. In November she holds her final solo exhibition, at the XXth Century West Galleries.
- 1968–1970** Mason continues to paint in her Upper West Side apartment as her alcoholism progresses. She grows increasingly reclusive and largely stops showing her work, though she participates in the American Color Print Society's annual exhibition in 1969.
- 1971** Emily and Wolf take Mason to Vermont for rehabilitation. Restless once she is discharged, she returns to New York against her daughter's wishes, promising not to drink. On June 28 she dies alone in her apartment of complications related to alcoholism. Her letters and papers remain untouched in a trunk until research begins, in 2013, for the monograph *Alice Trumbull Mason: Pioneer of American Abstraction*.
- 1973** The Whitney Museum of American Art holds Mason's first museum retrospective; selections travel to the University of Nebraska Art Gallery in Lincoln, the A. B. Closson Gallery in Cincinnati, the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, and the Georgia Museum of Art in Athens.

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September 10 – October 24, 2026
Alfredo Jaar: A Logo for America, 1987

October 29 – December 19, 2026
Mildred Thompson: Cosmos Calling