

LIBBIE MARK (1905 – 1972)

Abstract Expressionist American artist Libbie Mark (1905-1972) had connections with many of the twentieth century's most significant artists, including Grace Hartigan, Hans Hofmann, Larry Rivers, and Vaclav Vytlacil. She created her work in important artistic communities of New York and Provincetown. Her unique "collage paintings" reflect a deep experimentation with—and skilled handling of—color and texture that made her work stand out then and now.

One of five siblings, Libbie Berman was born in 1905 in Jersey City, New Jersey, to Naomi Rachel (Nellie) Berman, née Rubin and Harold Berman, an editor and translator of Hebrew texts.^[1] In 1927, Libbie married Edward Mark, and they lived in Jersey City, then Queens, New York, before settling in Great Neck, New York, around 1939.^[2] Their first child, Judith, was born in 1935, followed by Reuben in 1939. Having already set up a basement painting studio so she could paint but still be available to her family, in 1948 at the age of 43, Mark formalized her independent artistic activity by enrolling in courses at the Great Neck Adult Education (GNAE) fine arts program. Mark took classes with Betty Holliday Deckoff, a former Art Students League student of Vytlacil.^[3] Deckoff was an editorial associate at *ARTnews* before becoming the coordinator of GNAE,^[4] and she hired prominent New York artists to teach, many of whom she knew from her time at *ARTnews*, including Nell Blaine, Helen Frankenthaler, Grace Hartigan, Louise Nevelson, Fairfield Porter, and Larry Rivers.^[5] At GNAE Mark also studied with Rivers and likely first met Hartigan there. The family's art collection reflected Mark's connection with fellow artists: among others, they acquired a Rivers 1953 *Berdie* portrait study, and to support Libbie's friend during a well-documented difficult financial period, they purchased Hartigan's 1952 *Venetian Self-Portrait* from Tibor de Nagy Gallery.^[6]

Mark's early painting style varied before and during the beginnings of her formal training, but by the mid-1950s, she began a move towards Abstract Expressionism. This roughly coincided with changes in her personal and artistic life. After her youngest child graduated from high school in 1956, Mark and her husband lived between Long Island and New York City for two years. Mark was enrolled at the Art Students League between 1956 and 1958, taking courses from Vytlacil, Hofmann's former student and assistant. She also likely met many other influential teachers, including Vytlacil's prominent colleagues Will Barnet, Edwin Dickinson, George Grosz, William Zorach, and others on staff at that time.^[7] Mark attended Vytlacil's "Life Drawing, Painting and Composition" classes from December 1956 to May 1957 and from September 1957 to March 1958.^[8] A number of Mark's pieces from this time show her increasing interest and skill in abstraction. She worked in oil on canvas, as well as ink and watercolor on paper, experimenting with different methods and styles, likely having absorbed other artists' and her teachers' work, which she could now more easily study in the city.

Mark's connections and courses at the Art Students League led her to the Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts.^[9] Hofmann briefly taught at the League before establishing his own school, first located in New York, then very soon after also in Provincetown, the oldest continuous artist colony in the United States.^[10] On Vytlacil's recommendation, in 1957 at the age of 51, Mark applied for Hofmann's summer school session.^[11] In between her courses with Vytlacil, in July and August 1957,^[12] Mark attended Hofmann's final Provincetown summer course before he retired from teaching.^[13] Mark's classmates included Red Grooms and Helen Levitt.^[14] Many other artists such as Milton Avery, Sally Michel (Avery), Janice Biala, Adolph Gottlieb, Allan Kaprow, Lillian Orlowsky, and Mark Rothko also worked in Provincetown that summer.^[15] A few of Mark's largest paintings are from this Hofmann/League period, some dated with an "-HH" or an "-L" suffix on verso.

Following that first summer in Provincetown, in 1958 the Marks rented an apartment at 35 East 85th Street, fully transitioning to the city from Great Neck. In about 1962, the Marks moved to a new building at 176 East 71st Street, renting a separate painting studio nearby. Later, a second unit at East 71st served as her workspace; they also installed metal screens on their living room wall to easily rotate displays of her paintings. Dinah Rubinstein, professionally known as Dena, photographed Mark likely in her East 71st studio. She also took portraits of numerous other artists, including Dorothy Dehner, Willem De Kooning, Edwin Dickinson, Red Grooms, Chaim Gross, Robert Motherwell, Louise Nevelson, George Segal, Raphael Soyer, Jack Tworkov, and Andy Warhol.^[16]

Mark had just one solo show during her lifetime, at the age of 56. Knapik Gallery opened *Libbie Mark: Paintings and Collages* in May 1962 at 1470 First Avenue.^[17] Her transition to New York City had marked a significant increase in her artistic output and the establishment of what became her unique method of Abstract Expressionist painting. Mark had begun including collaged elements in a few pieces from the mid-1950s (the earliest documented is dated 1957) but by the early 1960s she almost exclusively incorporated paint with other materials on paper, Masonite, or canvas, to build up her heavily textured surfaces like the Knapik Gallery works, which she called *Collage Paintings*. Foregoing traditional titles, her paintings were dated and numbered, for example: *Collage Painting #67-6* (number 6, painted in 1967), or simply *Collage Painting #23*. Mark was among many artists working with collage during this time, creating “the inevitable expression...of the constantly decomposing and recomposing experience of the city.”^[18] However, Mark collaged in a distinctive and intricate way: her technique predominantly utilized the physical, three-dimensional properties of crumpled paper or tissue, imbedded into the paint, to build up texture in the works she exhibited. This is a departure from other artists' collage methods which took advantage of paper's other potential visual qualities, such as the flat shape of a cut-out or the color of the paper itself. A number of publications positively reviewed the Knapik show:

Miss [sic] Mark's handsome abstractions, high textured and rich in color brilliance, show a profound and vividly sensuous response to visual experience...the overall effect is scintillating. Considering the technique used in many of these collages, Miss [sic] Mark's spontaneity is all the more remarkable...These paintings are assuredly the work of a mature, imaginative, and dynamic artist. —*Manhattan East*, Jane Jaffe^[19]

One is a high-toned noonday picture dominated by a central red that tornadoes up into yellow, surrounded by green and blue-grey. Another abstraction has a midnight carnival flavor in its deep purples and blues sparked with red and surprises of veiny greens. —*ARTnews*, Jill Johnston^[20]

Photographer Nathan Rabin, who worked extensively for artists and collectors, such as William N. Copley, Lucien Goldschmidt, Claes Oldenburg, and Serge Sabarsky,^[21] documented Mark surrounded by a number of her paintings at the gallery.

Mark followed this solo exhibition with participation in a number of shows over the next few years, with the Vectors artists group, which would prove very significant for her career. A remarkably understudied but fascinating group, Vectors membership consisted of twenty-three artists over ten years, including two married couples.^[22] A catalogue for their *Eleventh Annual Exhibition* in 1967 stated:

In 1957 a group of artists with mutual respect for each other's creativity decided to exhibit together. They gave themselves the name, 'Vectors'—directional guides to various modes of expression from figurative to non-objective work.^[23]

Like other collectives before and since, the Vectors utilized different kinds of spaces as accessible alternatives to the traditional gallery. The group revisited venues known for their arts programming, among them the 92nd Street Y^[24] and the New York Public Library's Donnell Library Center,^[25] as well as the Riverside Museum.^[26] Vectors members had a number of overlapping histories and connections, from Work Projects Administration involvement^[27] and shared gallery representation (including Knapik),^[28] to studying with Hofmann and/or at the League^[29] and having a variety of other Provincetown and New York ties. Despite turnover, the group featured strong female representation. Notably, seven of the original 1957 roster of ten were women, and in eight of nine exhibitions with listed participants, over fifty percent were female.^[30] This is especially meaningful; women then, as now, were not as recognized or given as much exposure as men. Mark participated in five Vectors exhibitions between January 1963 and October 1967, the last at age 62.^[31]

When not in New York, Mark spent her summers painting in Provincetown: starting with her Hofmann course, through the end of the 1950s, continuing on through the 1960s at her most productive, and until a year before she died in the early 1970s. In 1972, Mark succumbed to lung cancer at age 66, having led an abbreviated but creative and remarkable life.

Unlike many other female artists of her time, who found marriage or having (or raising) children to be an art career restriction, Mark was able to pursue her career due to significant support from her husband Edward. Once her children went to college, the Marks relocated so she could be closer to the New York art scene. They invested in prestigious art courses. They rented city studio space. She painted, took classes, and participated in exhibitions, free of financial concerns. Edward's assistance was not just monetary, however. He saw himself as a provider of intangible things as well. He actively encouraged Mark's artistic career. A corporate financial executive at S. Gumpert & Co. food company, he even learned how to stretch canvas and make picture frames. It was vital to him that she should be happy. Summers in Provincetown were "for her." Possibly, without Edward's strong belief in her, Mark would not have produced this volume of work in such a short period of time. Her personal situation provided an opportunity, but to be clear: this was not a case of a comfortable housewife with a hobby.

The extent and duration of Mark's artistic activity, the quality of the work, the clear drive, and the related life decisions that made it happen, demonstrate her serious commitment to her art. From the Great Neck Adult Education fine arts program to the Art Students League to Provincetown, Mark painted in some of the United States' most significant artistic places. Her carefully crafted but dynamic pieces feature complex, impastoed surfaces with unexpected and rich color palettes.

Fifty years after her death, Mark has again come to the art world's attention due to the work of the Libbie Mark Provincetown Fund, in consultation with independent curator, Jennifer Uhrhane. The LMPF was established to promote Mark's artwork and establish her legacy by placing her paintings in public or private collections, and supporting research, exhibitions and programming that include her work whether online, in print, or in physical spaces. Recent solo and group exhibitions featuring her paintings in the 2020s have helped reintroduce her at a time of reflection and realization in the art world that more needs to be done to acknowledge the many talented artists of the past (especially women and other underrepresented groups) who were making strong work in their own time. The important research and outreach sponsored by the LMPF has added to the art historical record of this under-

recognized but important mid-century female artist. Mark's work is held in the Addison Gallery of American Art, the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, and in numerous private collections.

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Independent Curator and Consultant to Libbie Mark Provincetown Fund

[1]. "H. Berman, Edited Papers, Magazines: Expert on Hebrew Texts Dead at 70," May 31, 1949, *New York Times*, 23, ProQuest Web.

[2]. All of the information about Mark, unless otherwise cited, was provided by Mark's daughter and son, and obtained through their e-mail messages to and phone conversations with the author between June 2016 and November 2021.

[3]. Andrew D. Hottle, *The Art of the Sister Chapel: Exemplary Women, Visionary Creators, and Feminist Collaboration* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2014), 95.

[4]. *Ibid.*, 22, 95.

[5]. For more on these artists and their time at GNAE, see Helen A. Harrison, "The Boldness and Delicacy of Betty Holliday," March 18, 1979, *New York Times*, L116; Mary Gabriel, *Ninth Street Women: Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler: Five Painters and the Movement That Changed Modern Art* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2018), 647; and Ted Leigh, ed., *Material Witness: The Selected Letters of Fairfield Porter* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 181.

[6]. William T. La Moy and Joseph P. McCaffrey, eds., *The Journals of Grace Hartigan, 1951–1955* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 47, 63, 82. The Marks' purchase is in Hartigan's annotated gallery checklist on page 76. Both paintings are still in the Mark-Tanur family collection.

[7]. Course catalogue for 81st Regular Session, "Instructors 1956–1957," *Art Students League: September 17, 1956 to May 25, 1957*, 3, and course catalogue for 82nd Regular Session, "Instructors 1957–1958," *Art Students League: September 16, 1957 to May 27, 1958*, 3, Archives of the Art Students League of New York.

[8]. Art Students League Student Registration Records; course catalogue for 81st Regular Session, "Tuition and Schedule of Classes, 1956–1957," *Art Students League: September 17, 1956 to May 25, 1957*, 10; and course catalogue for 82nd Regular Session, "Tuition and Schedule of Classes, 1957–1958," *Art Students League: September 16, 1957 to May 27, 1958*, 10, Archives of the Art Students League of New York. It is important to note the cost of these classes. Her six weeks in 1957 at \$32 per = \$192. In 2024 dollars this is approximately \$2,130, using the saving.org inflation calculator, which utilizes the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics' Consumer Price Index data to calculate values. Her seven weeks in 1958 at \$34 per = \$238. In 2024 dollars this is about \$2,570.

[9]. The Art Students League-Provincetown connection is well documented. See for example, Rhoda Rossmore, Tony Vevers, Ronald G. Pisano, et al., *The League at the Cape 1993: An Historical Exhibition Sponsored by the Art Students League and the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, August 14, 1993 to September 20, 1993* (Provincetown, MA and New York, NY: Museum Galleries of the Provincetown Art Association and The Art Students League, 1993).

[10]. "Hans Hofmann Biographical Chronology: 1930–1939," Renate, Hans, and Maria Hofmann Trust, accessed February 13, 2019, <http://www.hanshofmann.org/1930-1939>.

[11]. Mark's registration, attendance, financial paperwork, and correspondence with Hofmann are in "Hans Hofmann papers, [circa 1904]–2011, bulk 1945–2000," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, accessed March 27, 2018, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/hans-hofmann-papers-5966>.

[12]. Using the saving.org inflation calculator, her \$170 in tuition is about \$1,600 in 2021 dollars.

Additional costs would have been two months or more of Provincetown accommodations, other living

expenses.

[13]. "Hans Hofmann Biographical Chronology: 1950–1959," Renate, Hans, and Maria Hofmann Trust, accessed February 13, 2019, <http://www.hanshofmann.org/1950-1959>.

[14]. Other students' registration, attendance, and financial paperwork as well as correspondence with Hofmann are in "Hans Hofmann papers."

[15]. Jason Andrew, *Biala: Provincetown Summers* (Provincetown, MA: Provincetown Art Association and Museum, 2018), [19]; Deborah Forman, "1935-1966: Hans Hofmann in Provincetown" in *The Tides of Provincetown: Pivotal Years in America's Oldest Continuous Art Colony, 1899-2011*, New Britain Museum of American Art, accessed February 16, 2023, <https://www.tfaoi.org/aa/9aa/9aa616.htm>; Melissa Renn, "Via Provincetown: The American Avant-Garde on Cape Cod, 1913–1966," in *A Century of Inspiration: Provincetown Art Association and Museum* (Provincetown, MA: Provincetown Art Association and Museum, 2015), 89, 92.

[16]. See Rubinstein's photographs in the Archives of American Art, "[Photographs of artists taken by Dena], [1964–1975]," accessed February 9, 2019, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/photographs-artists-taken-dena-11137>; in the Art Institute of Chicago collection, and in an Albright Knox Gallery exhibition, "The Brave Buffalo: Abstract Expressionism and the City," accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.albrightknox.org/art/exhibitions/brave-buffalo-abstract-expressionism-and-city>.

[17]. Archival materials, including the brochure and review clippings for this exhibition, are in the Libbie Mark Provincetown Fund Collection.

[18]. Jed Perl, *New Art City: Manhattan at Mid-Century* (New York, NY: Knopf, 2005), 281, 284.

[19]. Jane Jaffe, "News and Views of the Galleries: Mark at Knapik," *Manhattan East*, May 24, 1962, 4.

[20]. J. J. (Jill Johnston), "Reviews and previews: New names this month," *ARTnews* 61 (May 1962): 18.

[21]. Lisa Coldiron, Image Specialist for Special Projects, Image Collections, National Gallery of Art, e-mail message to author, February 25, 2019. The National Gallery of Art Library's Image Collections contain 27,000 negatives and 1,300 photographs by Rabin. "Featured Photographers: Nathan Rabin," National Gallery of Art, accessed January 30, 2019, <https://www.nga.gov/research/library/imagecollections/photographers-and-campaign-organizers.html>

[22]. For a full list of members, see <https://libbiemark.com/vector-artist-group/>.

[23]. Catalogue, *Vectors Eleventh Annual Art Exhibition*, October 9–27, 1967, Manufacturers Hanover Trust, Ben and Evelyn Wilson Papers.

[24]. Exhibited twice, see postcards: *Vectors Art Exhibition*, October 7–31, 1957, YMHA Kaufmann Auditorium (now 92nd Street Y), New York, NY, Rhoda Sklar Platt Papers, Collection Judith and Selina Trepp; *Vectors 7th Annual Exhibition*, November 22–December 6, 1963, YMHA Kaufmann Auditorium (now 92nd Street Y), Irving Lehman Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries. See also "140 years of cultural programming," 92nd Street Y, accessed January 31, 2018, <https://www.92y.org/about-us.aspx>.

[25]. Exhibited three times, see show listings: "Exhibitions in Galleries and Museums this Week," *New York Times*, September 17, 1961, X23, ProQuest Web; "Art Shows," *New York Times*, July 5, 1964, 16X, ProQuest Web; and "What's New in Art," *New York Times*, December 11, 1966, 192, ProQuest Web. The library, which also had a purposefully substantial art book collection, opened in 1955 across from the Museum of Modern Art and the former Museum of Contemporary Crafts, and behind the Whitney Museum of American Art. Sanka Knox, "Donnell Library to Open Tuesday," *New York Times*, December 7, 1955, 78, ProQuest Web.

[26]. Exhibited twice, see postcards: *Vectors 6th Annual Exhibition*, January 13–February 3, 1963, Riverside Museum, Irving Lehman Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries and *Vectors Paintings and Sculpture*, May 3–24, 1959, Riverside Museum, Ben and Evelyn Wilson Papers, Montclair State University Galleries, Montclair, NJ.

[27]. Jerome Burstyn, Ida Somkin, Ben Wilson, Evelyn Perlman Wilson, and Vladimir Yoffe worked for the WPA. "Transcript of Employment: Burstyn, Jerome," Francis V. O'Connor papers, 1920-2009. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; "From the Studio: Ida and Eugene Somkin duo exhibition," *The East Hampton Star*, accessed September 6, 2018, <http://easthamptonstar.com/Archive/1/Studio-33>; "Biography," Ben Wilson American Artist, accessed January 19, 2018, <https://benwilsonamericanartist.org/bio/>; "Fellow WPA Artist Evelyn Perlman, Ben's Future Wife," Ben Wilson American Artist, accessed January 19, 2018, <https://benwilsonamericanartist.org/portfolio/scrapbook/fellow-wpa-artist-evelyn-perlman-bens-future-wife/>; "Vladimir Yoffe," New Deal Art Registry, accessed January 20, 2018, <https://www.newdealartregistry.org/artist/Yoffevladimir/#>.

[28]. Capricorn Gallery exhibited Sophie Corwin, Anne Heliuff, and Robert Laden. Sophie Corwin and Anne Heliuff, Art and Artist Files; "What's New in Art," *New York Times*, December 18, 1966, x36, ProQuest Web. Knapik Gallery exhibited Sidney Delevante, Irving Lehman, Libbie Mark, and Ben Wilson. Artist resume, Sidney Delevante Art and Artist Files; Artist resume, Irving Lehman Papers; Exhibition announcement, *Libbie Mark: Paintings and Collages*; "Exhibitions," Ben Wilson American Artist, accessed January 19, 2018, <https://benwilsonamericanartist.org/exhibitions/>. Harry Salpeter Gallery exhibited Irving Lehman, Frances Manacher, Ben Wilson, and Abe Yurberg. Artist resume, Irving Lehman Papers; Frances Manacher Art and Artist Files; "Exhibitions," Ben Wilson American Artist; "Abraham Yurberg," Ward-Nasse Gallery, accessed July 15, 2016, <http://www.wardnasse.org/2200p179.htm>.

[29]. Sophie Corwin, Sidney Delevante, Theodore Fuchs, Helen Gerardia, Mary Heisig, Anne Heliuff, Irving Lehman, Libbie Mark, Sylvia Rutkoff, Mary Shaier, Ida Somkin, and John Stoehrer attended Art Students League. Student Registration Records, Archives of the Art Students League of New York. Sophie Corwin, Sidney Delevante, Helen Gerardia, Anne Heliuff, Robert Laden, Libbie Mark, and Mary Shaier attended Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts. Sophie Corwin, Anne Heliuff, Libbie Mark, and Mary Shaier: "Partial List of Hofmann Students Per Era," Color Creates Light: Studies with Hans Hofmann, accessed July 15, 2016, <http://www.colorcreateslight.com/studentsccl.html>; Delevante Art and Artist File; Gerardia "Line Form Color," Blanton Museum of Art exhibition, accessed February 28, 2019, <https://blantonmuseum.org/rotation/line-form-color/>; Robert Laden resume, Collection Nina Laden.

[30]. Postcard, *Vectors Art Exhibition* (1957); Women's City Club of New York, "Work by the Vectors, December–January 1959," *On the Agenda* XVI, no. 2 (December 1958): 2, Records of the Women's City Club of New York, Inc., d.b.a. Women Creating Change, 1915-2011, Box 61, Folder 4, Archives & Special Collections, Hunter College Libraries, Hunter College of the City University of New York, New York City; postcards: *Vectors 6th Annual Exhibition* and *Vectors 7th Annual Exhibition*; postcard, *Vectors 8th Annual Exhibition*; postcard, *Vectors Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture*, November 22–December 21, 1964, Spencer Memorial Gallery, Anne Heliuff artist file, Woodstock Artists Association & Museum Archives, Woodstock, NY; postcards: *Vectors Paintings and Sculpture* (1959) and *Vectors Eleventh Annual Art Exhibition*, October 9–27, 1967, Manufacturers Hanover Trust, Ben and Evelyn Wilson Papers, Montclair State University Galleries, Montclair, NJ.

[31]. Postcards: *Vectors 6th Annual Exhibition*, *Vectors 7th Annual Exhibition*, *Vectors 8th Annual Exhibition*, *Vectors Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture* (1964), and *Vectors Eleventh Annual Art Exhibition*.

CV

Born, 1905, Jersey City, New Jersey

Death, 1972, New York, New York

EDUCATION

1956-1958, Art Students League, New York

1957, Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts, Provincetown, Massachusetts

1948-mid-1950s, Great Neck Adult Education Fine Arts Program, Great Neck, New York

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

Knapik Gallery, New York, *Libbie Mark: Paintings and Collages*, 1962.

National Arts Club, New York, *Art of the Abstract Mark: Libbie Mark's Collage Paintings and Other Works*, 1950s-1960s, 2022.

Berry Campbell, New York, *Libbie Mark: Collage Paintings (1950s to 1960s)*, 2024.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Riverside Museum, New York, *Vector 6th Annual Exhibition*, 1963.

YMHA Kaufmann Auditorium, New York, *Vectors 7th Annual Exhibition*, 1963.

Contemporary Arts Gallery, Loeb Student Center, New York University, New York, *Vectors 8th Annual Exhibition*, 1964.

Spencer Memorial Gallery, Brooklyn, New York, *Vectors A Group Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture*, 1964.

Manufacturers Hanover Trust, New York, *Vectors 11th Annual Exhibition*, 1967.

Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts, *Women and Abstraction: 1741 – Now*, 2023.

Rosenberg & Co. Gallery, New York, *Collage: Selections from Post-War Women*, 2023.

Berry Campbell, New York, *Perseverance*, 2024.

Provincetown Art Association and Museum, Massachusetts, *Recent Gifts to the Permanent Collection: Part I*, 2023-2024.

Davis Galleries, Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, New York, *Recent Art Acquisitions: Highlights from the Collection of Hobart and William Smith Colleges*, 2025.

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts

Provincetown Art Association and Museum, Massachusetts