

LOÏS FREDERICK, AN AMERICAN ARTIST IN PARIS

Mathilde Gubanski, Diane de Polignac Gallery, 2020

After studying Fine Arts at the University of Nebraska, and then at the Kansas City Art Institute, Lois Frederick won a highly prestigious Fulbright award. This fellowship was created in 1946 to promote cultural exchanges between the USA and Europe. In 1954, Lois Frederick won this award a second time, a very rare phenomenon. Like many American artists, she decided to go to Paris to complete her artistic education.

Franco-American Exchanges

The movement of American artists towards Europe was encouraged by the G.I. Bill voted in 1944. This American law financed the studies abroad of demobilized soldiers of the Second World War. The beneficiaries were encouraged to pursue their interests, which explains the very large number that chose artistic careers. The president Dwight D. Eisenhower launched a programme of cultural exchanges called "People-to-People" in 1956. It was intended to turn American students abroad into ambassadors. During the 1950's, Paris hosted over 2000 students from across the Atlantic in this context. Some, such as Lois Frederick, stayed permanently.

"Paris is a Celebration"¹: the new Hemingways

During the 1920s, major American writers worked in Paris: Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, etc... Their writings created the image of an elegant and festive Paris in the American mind. In 1964, the publication of Hemingway's memoirs established the idea of Paris as a moveable feast. Inspired by this, a generation of American writers settled in Post-War Paris. These included John Breon, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Mary McCarthy, James Baldwin, and Truman Capote.

The writer James Jones moved to Paris in 1958. He was already a celebrity in the USA. His book, *From Here to Eternity*, published in 1951 had been a huge success. In his Parisian apartment, James Jones hosted many American personalities: politicians (such as the New York senator Jacob Javits), celebrities (such as Jean Seberg, wife of the novelist Romain Gary) and writers (such as Henry Miller). James Jones wrote about the work of the American painters Alice Baber and her husband Paul Jenkins. The connection between American artists and writers was reinforced by the many exhibitions in English language bookshops. *Le Mistral*, a bookshop owned by the former American GI George Whitman and the English bookshop created by the French woman, Gaïte Frogé, partner of the American painter Norman Rubington, were noteworthy. These bookshop-galleries played an essential part in the circulation of English language books and magazines and were also exhibition venues and theatres for the first performances of poetry.

1. Translator's note: This is the English translation of "Paris est une fête", the French title of *A Moveable Feast*.

Artistic Education in Paris

The American artists studied at the École des Beaux-Arts, the Académie Julian, at La Grande Chaumière, as well as in the studios of the sculptor Ossip Zadkine and the painter Fernand Léger. These two artists had fled to the USA during the war and naturally hosted American artists in their Parisian studios when they returned. The abstract painter Henri Goetz, who was of American origin, opened up his studio while Sonia Delaunay also hosted several foreign artists.

Although beneficiaries of the G.I. Bill had to register at a university, there was no penalty for not actually attending classes and some artists preferred a more free form of education, even self-teaching. Ellsworth Kelly, who was a beneficiary of the G.I. Bill explained that Paris became "a third level university of free association, without classes, that was fully paid for"². Time spent in Paris became a real form of artistic emancipation and experimentation.

The influence of European Culture

American artists admired the old masters of the Louvre and the Musée de Cluny. Paris was a temple of western art. According to the painter Shirley Goldfarb "You have to see the Mona Lisa at the Louvre, it's part of an artist's profession"³.

American artists were also fascinated by the "late" Monet. The Musée de l'Orangerie reopened in 1952, allowing them to discover the *Grandes décorations* (Great Decorations): eight wall paintings, all two metres high, showing flowering waterlilies on water. The immersive display of the works in a room at the museum, designed by Monet himself, amazed the artists that saw these paintings as a prefiguration of a form of non-geometric abstraction. Sam Francis thus claimed to make "a pure version of the Monet of the final period"⁴.

Ellsworth Kelly, Joan Mitchell and Philip Guston visited Giverny: it was an aesthetic shock for them. Ellsworth Kelly said "I remember one work above all, it was huge, and was completely white, covered with a thick layer of paint. There was a little orange and possibly some pink and light green. (...) and the scale was also very impressive. (...) when I saw them, I realized that I wanted to make paintings of that size, the size of walls. (...) the day after my trip to Giverny, I made a green painting, a monochrome. I had already created paintings with six coloured panels but I wondered if I could do one in only one colour. This was the influence that Monet had on my work."⁵

2. - Cited by Merle Shipper in *Americans in Paris, the 50's*, exhibition catalogue, Northridge Fine Art Gallery, 22 October-30 November 1979, California State University, 1979

3. - Shirley Goldfarb, *Carnets*. Montparnasse, 1971-1980, Quai Voltaire, 1992, p. 193

4. - Éric de Chasse, *La Violence décorative: Matisse dans l'art américain*, Nîmes, Jacqueline Chambon, 1998, p. 391

5. - Yve-Alain Bois et al., *Ellsworth Kelly: les années françaises, 1948-1954*, [galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume, 17 March-24 May 1992], Éditions du Jeu de Paume, 1992, 211 p.

New York : the New Capital of Art

This was the age of abstraction on both sides of the Atlantic. Abstract Expressionism was triumphant in the USA and Jackson Pollock was its figurehead. Little by little, New York took over from Paris as the world art capital. This victory was doubtless confirmed in 1964 when Robert Rauschenberg was the first American artist to win the Grand Prize of the Venice Biennale. Europe in this way recognized the talent of this great American artist.

American Women Artists

American women artists occupied an important place on the Parisian art scene. Joan Mitchell arrived in Paris in 1948. This first visit was made possible by a grant from the Art Institute of Chicago. After this, she spent several summers in the French capital. She wrote about these trips to her partner from New York, Michael Goldberg: "It's warm at last here (...) I might go around the museums again (...). I'm still not doing anything, I see people, I wander (...) sometimes I draw by the Seine. (...) I draw at the Louvre. I spent all day yesterday at the Louvre – Paris is deserted but the Louvre is full of unbearable languages, especially the ones from the North, the wild scenes by Rubens – David – Surrealism – (...) I can't describe the Louvre..."⁶

In 1959, she settled permanently in Paris to be with the Canadian painter Jean-Paul Riopelle. As for Lois Frederick, in 1956 she married Gérard Schneider, the great pioneer of Lyrical Abstraction, and also stayed in France for the rest of her life.

Lee Krasner, one of the most important figures of the New York School, visited Paris in 1956. She wrote to her friends that the Louvre went beyond "anything [she] could have imagined". She was staying with her friend

6. - Letter from Joan Mitchell to Michael Goldberg, undated. Michael Goldberg Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution



Lois Frederick in Les Audigiers, in the countryside of Paris in the 1970's

Photo : André Villers, Adagp, Paris - reserved rights.

Paul Jenkins, another American painter in Paris, when she got a call from New York telling her that her husband Jackson Pollock had died in a car crash.

The artist Nancy Spero went to Paris to study with André Lhote. A graduate of the Art Institute of Chicago (like Joan Mitchell), she had settled in Indiana with her husband the painter Léon Golub. Nancy Spero then devoted most of her time to educating their two young children. These two artists felt marginalized in the New York scene and so chose Paris to give a new momentum to their career.

Difficult Living Conditions

In Paris, living conditions were hard for artists. Everything was in short supply and winters were cold. Paris did not yet have the modern comforts that were familiar to Americans "an unfavourable exchange rate, limited resources in many cases, inadequate housing"⁷ commented the art critic, John Devoluy who was responsible for organizing an exhibition of former beneficiaries of the G.I. Bill from Paris. He also added that these artists suffered from "bitter intellectual competition, the constant doubts that beset all true artists and which amplified the status of expatriate, recurring homesickness, (...) the difficulties of using a foreign language [and] unfamiliar habits."

The American Communities in Paris

These difficult living conditions reinforced solidarity among artists exiled from across the ocean. They shared resources, studios, contacts... A community spirit was created and was reinforced.

The Café du Dragon at Saint-Germain became the HQ of the group that gravitated around Sam Francis: Norman Bluhm, Lawrence Calcagno and Al Held.

It was in this spirit of camaraderie that the painter Ellsworth Kelly met the composer John Cage, the artist Alice Baber met the gallerist Colette Robert, and the painter Paul Jenkins lent his Paris studio to his friend Joan Mitchell.

Larry Rivers, a G.I. Bill artist, shared his studio with the Franco-American artist Niki de Saint Phalle. In 1961, she invited Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns to participate in her *Tirs à la carabine* (Shooting Pieces). Niki de Saint Phalle thus played an essential part in exchanges between Parisian Nouveaux Réalistes artists and neo-Dada artists from New York. Perfectly bilingual, the creator of the iconic Nanas was the perfect interpreter and grouped around her a community of American artists.

In 1950, G.I. Bill artists led by the painter Paul Keene established the Galerie Huit: a co-operative intended to provide an exhibition space to American artists in Paris. It was managed by the artists and a committee, which was

7. John Devoluy, "Veterans Exhibit Art", 1948, undated publication. Bizinsky Papers, Archives of American Art

renewed every six months, chose the exhibition themes. In 1956, the *Le Monde* critic, Michel Conil-Lacoste was enthusiastic, “about the spirit of fraternity of the young Americans in Paris” and evoked the Galerie Huit as “a sort of Greenwich Village institution in Paris.”⁸

Affirmed Americanness

Like Loïs Frederick, the poet John Ashbery received a Fulbright award and moved to Paris in 1958. He met the American writer Harry Mathews there, who was at the time married to Niki de Saint Phalle. In 1966, John Ashbery published an article about these Americans in Paris. He refused the term “expatriates”, showing on the contrary the very strong link that connected these artists to their home country, indicating that they remained above all American artists.

For him, they came to Paris to keep their “Americanness” intact in an environment where this feeling could best take root and blossom. The calm and isolation of exile combined to complete this perilous experiment which, when it succeeds can culminate in a form of exciting art, independent of its environment.”⁹

The Americans of Paris positioned themselves in this way as representing American Art, neither exiles, nor refugees, but ambassadors of their country in Europe.

Loïs Frederick’s path fits logically into the American cultural effervescence in Paris. She thus stayed in close contact with her original culture and so remained a fundamentally American artist.



Exhibition *Loïs Frederick, peintures et gouaches*, February 16th – March 17th 1984, Galerie Suisse de Paris, Paris, France
Photo : André Morain - reserved rights

8. - Michel Conil-Lacoste, “The American Artist in Paris”, *The New York Times*, 8 January 1956

9. - “American Sanctuary in Paris”, *Artnews Annual*, 1966, cited in John Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, *Art Chronicles*. 1957-1987, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 85-97