

A painter and printmaker who traveled easily between full-blown abstraction and stylized portraiture, Will Barnet died in November at his home in the National Arts Club building along Manhattan's Gramercy Park at the age of 101. Barnet made his mark as an influential teacher and as an artist who bucked contemporary trends to forge his own singular visions of American life.

Born in the former whaling town of Beverly, Massachusetts, in 1911, Barnet was the son of Eastern European immigrants. When he was 12, he set up his own studio in the basement of the family house. Among his first encounters with art were the carvings on old tombstones in a nearby cemetery. Those memorials made him realize, as he later recalled, "that being an artist would give me an ability to create something which would live on after death."

After attending the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, he went to New York to study at the Art Students League in 1930, renting a room for \$1 a night, roaming the city streets, and sketching the forlorn Depression-era outcasts in imitation of one of his heroes, Honoré Daumier. Not long after, Barnet became an accomplished printmaker, whose works mined a vein of social realism and whose talents led to his being appointed official



## A Contrarian Centenarian

In an 80-year career, Will Barnet's art went from abstraction to figuration and back again **BY ANN LANDI**

printer for the League. He had his first solo exhibition in 1935; four years later, his art was included in the New York World's Fair.

By the 1940s, under the influence of modernist innovations, Barnet's work had become entirely abstract. He joined a group known as the Indian Space painters, who incorporated Native American imagery into their visual vocabulary. In 1941, he also began a lengthy teaching career at the Art Students League and later at the Cooper Union (where his students included James Rosenquist, Cy Twombly, and Knox Martin). Summer positions in the Midwest and Washington State allowed him to "spread the gospel of his teach-

ing methods and philosophy," noted Bruce Weber, senior curator of the National Academy Museum.

In the early 1960s, Barnet developed the style for which he is best known—flattened and sharply contoured scenes of family life, taking as subjects his four children and his second wife, Elena, who posed for one of his most popular and widely reproduced works, *Woman Reading* (1965). In the '70s, he painted a series of mysterious images of women in dark forests or waiting on the porches of seaside houses, and more recently he returned to abstraction, producing work the critic Roberta Smith described

as "remarkably fresh in every way." "He was such a bridge between older ideas and contemporary practice," notes Barbara Haskell, a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art. "He was open to different styles of painting and sculpture in a way that was unique, and he knew everyone from Reginald Marsh to James Rosenquist." In addition to having 80 solo shows, Barnet was the subject of the 2011 retrospective "Will Barnet at 100" at the National Academy Museum and was a recipient of a National Medal of Arts, presented by President Barack Obama. ■

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