

Will Barnet

Will Barnet, the painter, printmaker and teacher, who has died aged 101, mastered abstraction and figuration, painted Gypsy Rose Lee, fought with Willem de Kooning and found his true *métier* in the aesthetic of American contemplation.



Will Barnet Photo: REUTERS

9:33PM GMT 03 Dec 2012

When he arrived in New York in 1931, Barnet was already radicalised – propelled as much by what he had witnessed growing up during the Depression as by the potential of artistic mediums and movements. He won a scholarship to the city's independent school, the Art Students League. The institution was to become his second home; he learnt printmaking there and for more than four decades was a cherished teacher to an array of 20th-century masters, including Cy Twombly and Mark Rothko.

Barnet was as fluid an artist as he was consistent a teacher. He proved a creative chameleon for eight decades, with work spanning social realism, symbolism, portraiture and abstraction. In the 1930s his muse was the tough beat of city life. Through lithographs and sketches he captured harried scenes of cafeterias and fish markets. He moved on to dramatic abstraction in the 1950s as

a member of the Indian Space Painters, a group of artists who fused American Indian imagery with the Modernism of European painters such as Pablo Picasso and Paul Klee.

It was to be his poetic depictions of homesteads and family which finally brought him national acclaim in the 1970s. These included perhaps his most famous work, *Woman Reading*, in which Barnet's wife, Elena, reclines in bed lost in a book and the company of her cat, *Madame Butterfly*. Barnet's combination of bold block-colour schemes and intimate subject matter, composed with pared-down Japanese and Scandinavian influences, proved extremely popular. His works in this style were reprinted in poster editions across America.

Will Barnet was born on May 25 1911 at Beverly, Massachusetts, into a family of Russian and East European immigrants. His father was a machinist in the local shoe factory, a small-town future Barnet railed against. He learned of art's potential at an early age, both in the public library and in the town's cemetery, where he studied the engravings on colonial gravestones. "At the age of 10 or 12," he later stated, "I discovered that being an artist would give me an ability to create something which would live on after death."

In New York he took dollar-a-day lodgings and honed his draughtsmanship. With the French cartoonist Honoré Daumier as his role model, Barnet walked the streets as a Manhattan flâneur. In 1935 he married a fellow painter, Mary Sinclair, with whom he had three sons. However, by the early 1950s they had divorced and Barnet had remarried. Elena Ciurlys, his second wife, and their daughter Ona became the endearing yet pensive subject matter for many of his future paintings and drawings. "There is always an undercurrent of uncertainty and introspection that pervades his work. There is such a hot emotional core to it," assessed John Driscoll, of Driscoll Babcock Galleries, who represented Barnet for much of the last decade.

Barnet had more than 80 solo exhibitions during his life, beginning in 1935 at the Eighth Street Playhouse and ending with a centenary show at the National Academy Museum, New York. His blend of the personal and universal was commercially successful. "We sold paintings to both public and private collections and there was always great interest," stated Driscoll. "We did the Art Dealers Association of America fair and at one point we put up five or six of his paintings and we sold all of them. Yoko Ono bought one, a major trustee from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston bought one."

Barnet worked until the end of his life, even after losing the use of a leg in 2003. In his final years, he returned to abstraction, this time full of summer hues. It was the latest uncompromising shift in a lifetime spent bucking the trend: he famously clashed with Willem de Kooning over personal

inspirations (Barnet proposed Vermeer, to de Kooning's horror). Accepting a commission to paint Gypsy Rose Lee's portrait for rent money was the extent to which he would compromise his integrity.

His work sits in the collections of most of the major American museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Art and the Museum of Modern Art, in addition to those of international institutions such as the British Museum and the Vatican Museum. In January 2012 France honoured him with the insignia of Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters. The following month he received the National Medal of Arts at the White House. Sitting alongside fellow recipient Al Pacino at the ceremony, Barnet was praised by Barack Obama for his "indelible mark on American culture". "My dedication has always been to humanity," stated Barnet about his long career. "To express in my art the fragility of life."

He is survived by Elena and their daughter , and by the three sons of his first marriage. His first wife predeceased him.

Will Barnet, born May 25 1911, died November 13 2012

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