Distinguished women artists have been recorded since the 16th century. These women were very often successful in their own time and sometimes even the supporters of their families. Most often they stayed in the areas they had been born and raised in. Let me review from each century a few such women.

Vannia Fortana of Bologna was a 17th century artist who supported 11 children and her husband through the commissioned altar pieces she painted - which was unusual, since women painters have traditionally painted still-lifes and portraits.

In the 18th century there was the famous court painter to Marie Antoinette - Elizabeth Vigée Le Brun, who after her father's death supported her family as well as her husband's gambling debt, plus her mission.

By the 19th century names of women painters are much more familiar to us - thanks to the impressionist movement and the easing of Victorian standards.

One of the best known to us of course is the American artist Mary Cassatt. But there was another American, Julie Adet Perry, who was a neighbor of Claude Monet for 10 years and became his protégé. However, she is unknown to us today because her family decreed that selling paintings would be "undecent."

Even in our century women have had a difficult time establishing their professional identity. Many have been married to husbands who were famous artists - whose careers often over...
shattered theirs. In other cases critics have chosen to downplay women's work as "fine for a woman" and patronizingly detecting a feminine personality in their art.

This lack of acknowledgement of women is even carried to the point that although Janson's definitive "History of Art" does not mention a single female artist, nor Mary Cassatt nor Rosa Bonheur. Thus, one can not help sense the prejudices and double standards set in the male dominated art world.

However, this century appears to have given women unprecedented opportunities. For example, at the very famous 1913 Armory Show there were over 40 women who exhibited their paintings. Later under the "New Deal", 35% of the artists in the federal aid programs in the thirties were women. At the same time there were many large group shows in which about 30% of the artists were women. The Second World War seemed to have started a per-turn, and by the end of the 50's the situation was appalling. Now women artists were largely shut out of galleries and museums, and by the 1970's only 10 major art galleries in New York were showing the work of 18 women compared to the works of 190 men—and only 16% of all the galleries in New York carried works by women. I think one of the big reasons was that they were isolated from one another. They didn't have the freedom of then
Their counterparts did in "hanging out together." They didn't go to fancy cafes or have their "clubs." There was one such "club" on the Lower East Side where a few women, some who happened to be wives of famous artists, did gather, but I will mention that later.

It is amazing that now in the 80's most of the galleries in SoHo are run and operated by women - and another interesting fact is that by the 70's, 60% of the students in art schools were women and 70% of the practicing professional artists were women.

The women, who had long been the object of man's gaze through the centuries, were now changing the perspective. Instead of being painted objects, they were now the painters themselves.

No doubt in connection with the active "women's movement," by the mid 70's there was an awareness in the country of the neglected women artists, and women artist shows were mounted in Los Angeles and one at the Brooklyn Museum. Born in Washington, there will be a National Museum of Women in the arts which plans to open in 1986 in a renovated Masonic Temple not far from the White House. The core of the museum's holdings will be over a hundred works of Italian and American artists donated by a private collector.
This is a huge subject for an informal talk, so before I show you the few slides I have brought, I am going to tell you about the few women painters I have selected—most of them well be known to you. I’m sure Theodora did try to cut across the various social classes and economic background by knowing they have common the fact they are women.

In an effort to see where this has taken each of them, let me begin by telling you about two French artists. The first is Suzanne Valadon, whose illegitimate son, Maurice Utrillo, is probably better known than she is, and in the 1920s they both belonged to a group known as the Painters of Montmartre. She was born in 1867 into a poor provincial family and at an early age went to Paris. Undeterred and uncertain, she struggled to pursue her painting in factories and doing other manual work. Before becoming a circus acrobat, an accident forced her to leave the circus and soon after she became a model for plein-air painters such as Cezanne, Lautrec, and Degas. At this time she herself began to paint, and Degas began to guide and develop her talent. When her son Utrillo was in his late teens he had become a self-destructive alcoholic, and to help distract him from alcohol, and as a therapy, his mother urged him to paint. It is remarkable that here is a woman who, by her own talent, energy and courage, encourages her son to paint, and that they
are both able to overcome their past and become each in their own right famous artists.

The second famous artist I will show is Sonia Delaunay, wife of Robert Delaunay, who was born in Russia. She is known as a cubist, and her talent carried her into many fields—such as bookmaking, the theatre, fashion, advertising and interior design—always trying to make art part of daily life. She also created murals on a monumental scale for the 1937 Paris Exposition.

Books written on cubism mention her only in passing, and although she is widely recognized and admired here in the U.S., very few galleries have exhibited her work, and virtually no museum presentations of her works have been held here. Undoubtedly part of the difficulty is that, in the minds of many, her works are assimilated to readily to that of her husband who was also a cubist.

She was born into a Jewish family in Southern Russia and at the age of 5 adopted by her maternal uncle, a lawyer of considerable wealth. She grew up in St. Petersburg and at the age of 18 her education in art study and travel began—and three years later she arrived in Paris. She had her first show in 1908 and in 1910 married Robert Delaunay and didn't have the second show until 1953, 13 years after her husband's death. She herself said she had too much
to do, and it really didn't matter anyway—yes, she was busy. Constantly experimenting with colors, trying to master the techniques of artists like Gauguin and Van Gogh.

A well-known example of her early work was a book cover she made for Blaise Cendrars, a poet she greatly admired. It consists of one sheet of paper folded accordion style (unfolded it measures two meters). The text sits on the right side of the illuminations, and there is a profusion of block types in different styles and sizes. It may look casual to the eye, but it was a unique experiment, trying to combine into one work of art, a written text and a visual image—perhaps she was influenced by the Orientals.

Until World War I both she and her husband's income derived from family properties, but all that changed with the War and they had to consider new means of support. She really became the bread winner in the beginning. A great financial success came from her association with Jacques Heim, the couturier. She designed fabrics and from there ventured into advertising, interior design and even designed playing cards.

She was at the very center of the Cubist movement yet perhaps because of the very great variety of her talents, her reputation as a famous artist has until recently been subordinated to that of her husband.
Today there were two women friends, Valdez and Detovery, so foreign in background, having had very different lives, now living side by side at the Musée de l'Art Moderne in Paris.

The next two examples that I chose were from the United States, but again women artists whose lives were intimately linked with other artists. One is Elaine de Kooning, who was also a writer for Art News, and the other is Lee Krasner, wife of Jackson Pollock, whom she married in 1945. Both she and Elaine de Kooning lived out on Long Island with their husbands, and were two of the seven female members of the "Club" I mentioned earlier. This "Club" was founded around 1949 and was on the lower east side. It was the center of much avant-garde artistic activity.

Elaine de Kooning is perhaps most famous for a portrait she made of John F. Kennedy, but is generally known for her grand canvases painting of flowers and birds, with enormous balletic energy.

Lee Krasner, was born in Brooklyn as Irene, but later changed her name to the sexually neutral Lee. She donated a lot of her energy to advance her husband's career, so was for a long time regarded simply as an artist's wife. She is now known as one of the innovative forces in American modern art. However, it is ironic to again note that two art critics, Barbara Rose...
and Sam Hunter when writing about the great days of the Long Island abstract painters of the 50's and 60's gave little mention to Elaine, and then only as a writer, and show one little black and white illustration of Lee's in their book.

I would also like to tell you about two other American women artists who began their careers early in this century. The first is Alice Reall and the other Jane Peterson.

Alice Reall was born and raised in a small town in Penn. which she described as stuffy and provincial. Her father was Irish and a railroad clerk. Her mother's ancestors went back to a signer of the Declaration of Independence. She knew at an early age that she wanted to be an artist. And at a summer session at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, she fell in love and married a fellow art student from a wealthy aristocratic Cuban family. In 1926 she returned with him to Havana, where she had a daughter, and that same year she held her first one-man show — these were paintings of Cuban beggars and poor mothers with their children. Shortly after, Alice and her husband returned to New York to live the bohemian life and promptly, as she said it, "regard as statute to death." In 1927 her daughter died and shortly after her husband took their second child back to his family, and he went.
off to Paris to begin a new life without her. Alice broke down and was hospitalized, later attempting suicide. From these early stormy years came some powerful works. These early paintings are distorted and almost primitive expressions of emotion. In the 30's she survived on the WPA projects. Although, because of her wildly expressive paintings, hospitals, schools and institutions didn't want to house her works. During this time she lived in Greenwich Village with a man she described as an intellectual parasite, who also happened to be a drug addict. Later, when she began to date a wealthy Harvard graduate who remained her friend until his death—the parasite in a jealous rage blashed two of her paintings. Later she moved to Harlem, having fallen in love with a Puerto Rican Berger-Peiger player. Although they parted in 1938 she remained in the area for 25 years and painted the neighbors and the people of Harlem. In 1939 and 41 she had two sons. In a kind of reverse rebellion of her style, she has become a doctor and the other a lawyer.

In the 60's the N.Y. intellectual and luminaries of the art world had their portraits painted by her. Sometimes her critics have excoriated her paintings as caricatures because she emphasized the heads leaving backgrounds, hands and limbs sketchy. This was her way
sometimes of emphasizing helpness instead of strength. John Russell, an critic of the N.Y. Times, once wrote - "To be painted by Miss Read is not simply the equivalent of a body search - it is the equivalent of a body and soul search."

The work was warmly greeted in a long-delayed retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1974. She died last year at the age of 84 - and she dedicated this memoir of her life - "My life was pure women's life in a way - I had a very hard life, and I paid the price for it - but I did as I wanted - and I'm a high powered person."

In contrast to Alice Neel I have chosen a much less known American artist to make as dramatic as possible contrast between the Bahian artist who is really playing on the life traditionally ascendant to the male artist - and the life of a woman who performed a born gynic existence - this is Jane Peterson -

Born in Elgin, Illinois, the daughter of a jeweler, she too at an early age knew she wanted to paint. After finishing high school she came to N.Y. and enrolled at the Pratt Institute - Her father was set against it, but her mother loaned her money to come, and with it gave her some advice too - which was
"Never go out with a man who smokes cigarettes, never let a man buy or serve you wines or hard spirits."

As an article in the N.Y. Times was later to describe her - "she arrived in N.Y. with 300 borrowed dollars, and wearing hand-me-downs from an older sister - golden-haired and pretty, the double of Amelia Earhart, she was later to walk with princes and heads of states and be surrounded by art and treasures in her 5th Avenue mansion."

A warm and kindly star must have been over Jane Peterson. She worked hard and her work matured quickly. As one of the Institute's shows she met some rich patrons, among them was F.C. Tiffany. Later she was to paint the Tiffany gardens at Cipriani Bay. She is known for her landscapes and flower paintings and has won a number of prizes here and in Europe on these works. As a nature lover, she was especially drawn to the landscapes of France, Turkey, Spain and Italy, especially Venice.

I had first heard of her through a friend, who many years ago had shared an apartment with her niece in N.Y., and had talked about her identical aunt who lived in a mansion on Fifth Avenue, walking around in sneakers, surrounded by her own paintings, old master pieces, rich tapestries and antique furniture -
with a roof top studio to paint.

At this point you are probably wondering how a struggling young artist got to live so comfortably. Let me tell you she did heed her mother's advice. Once when invited to the theater and to Delmonico's by one of her collectors, she said she would only go on the condition that he smoke no cigarettes and offer her no wine. She also owned a lot at the arena, and knowing this she enjoyed arena, she invited her often. It was there that she met Monty Bernard Phillips, a distinguished international lawyer, who had among many things drawn the original charter for Eastman Kodak Corporation in which he owned a large number of shares. They were married in 1925, he was 77 years old and had never been married. He bought her the house on Fifth Avenue and later the one around the corner on 83rd Street. He built the studios so she would have plenty of space to paint. He also built the roof top studio so that she would be close to him. A few years later -

She once said she failed to favor the gestue.

The cruel, that work - labeled by some today as art - she always wanted to depict things of beauty, her flower paintings, which she spent hours on experimenting with light and color - are often spoken of as "Healing Pictures."
The Peterson had a very successful early career - she taught, her paintings were usually all sold as soon as she laid, and she was widely acclaimed. But by the time she died she was practically unknown.

Her work as I will show you in a slide I have is lyrical and romantic and like her life somehow out of tune with the violent strident tempos of modern art and life.

In 1970 the Strand and Adler galleries in N.Y. had a retrospective show of her works.
1. Suzanne Valadon
   1909. Adam's Eve - Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris

2. 1914. The Hill of the Church at Meyzieu.
           The paintings sell for between $10,000 -
           $20,000 - and she has trouble staying in this
           range.
           Her work is sometimes considered primitive
           but there seems to be a sophisticated style to them.

3. Sonia Delaunay
   1908. Yellow Snake. - Paris private collection.
           Notice Gauguin: Van Gogh type colors.
           Early period.

           She is noted for her circles,
           and especially the use of black - notice face.

5. 1920. Lee Truesner. - Untitled. - Oil on Pressed
           wood. - Characteristic of early Pollock years.
           and brink.

           She has no problem getting $150,000
           for her paintings at auction. - In 1981
           a painting of hers called The Spring
           c. 1964, sold for $23,000. It was only 1.5
           x 1.5 meters.
11. Jane Peterson
1923 - Pan American Pavilion in Venice - oil on canvas

12. Isabel Bishop
1932 - Union Square - oil on canvas

13. 1942 - Ice Cream Cones - oil tempera on Masonite

Also came to N.Y. from the mid-West - she is America's leading humanist painter, and had a studio on Union Sq. for 50 years - this favorite subject of Union Square and the people there - she was once mobbed when a group of drunks gathered up and threatened her shooting her
A capitalist—making money off their misery.

The techniques derived from Baroque period, most notably Peter Ruben. She chose to emulate him because the technique and composition of his work expressed the quality of movement she sought. She also captures the old master glow of luminous paintings with subtle tones with glowing accents of orange and other colors.

A retrospective of her work was held at the Univ. of Arizona Museum of Art. In or three years ago there was an exhibit of her art at Regus, where she was compared fellow members of the N.Y. school, and the W.P.A. artist. She came to Regus and spoke at that time. I hear she is very sweet and soft spoken.

Grace Hartigan.  Born in Newark, 1922.
4. 1958 - Fredericktown - Ael

15. 1960 - Snow Engel - Ael

In the 60's, was called 'the mood' celebrated women artist painter in the U.S. In 1958 she was the only woman chosen by The Museum of Modern Art for its show, "The New American Painting" which traveled to 8 European countries. On its return she sold every painting in
that show, and almost every painting from that period.

She was also one of the few female members of the "Club." She was the second generation of Abstract painters—her technique is quite as you can see—her paintings incorporate city imagery, floor windows and glimpses of figures with bold brushstrokes—her paintings are in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, Whitney and the Met.

Helen Frankenthaler—1938

I have chosen the last 3 slides of H.F. because currently there is a show of her painting at the Guggenheim. She is probably the best-known woman artist of the 50's, and she has been well exhibited. In 1969 at the Whitney and in 1975 at the Corcoran in Washington, and in 1982 a show at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston—well as quite a few others.

Her career took off when she was asked to organize a benefit exhibit "The Bennington Alumnae" for her alma mater in 1953.

16. 1952—Mountains and Rain—National Gallery—Washington—One of her most important paintings currently on loan to the Met.

17. 1967—The Steep Enough—Acrylic on canvas 10' x 9'. It is in the MFA. This painting is characteristic of her style of the 60's. One painting of hers from
She is credited for inventing the pochette technique - this is done by laying a canvas - usually large - on the floor. After the canvas is primed and raw, thus the colors soak into the canvas. Sometimes she holds them up letting the colors drip to cause certain effects.

In 1958 she married Robert Motherwell and for 13 years they became the kind of "royal family" of modern American Art.

When I saw an article in the N.F. Times a couple of weeks ago, on her show at the Guggenheim, she was only referred to as "colorist". And I want to end by saying perhaps at last the woman artist has finally freed herself from the role as wife or mother in the critic's eye, and now stands on equal ground with her male peers.

Florence Wilhelmi

March 11, 1985