

Free spirit

Intrepid artist and explorer Anna Walinska is celebrated two decades after her death

Born in 1906, she moved to Paris at the height of the Jazz Age, traveled the world by prop plane in the 1950s, and painted for eight decades

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ANNA WALINSKA IN 1950. (COURTESY OF ATELIER ANNA WALINSKA)

While the lives of famous artists are often raked over in minute detail, the story of adventuress and modernist Anna Walinska is one rarely shared, though the London-born woman lived fearlessly, globally, passionately (and usually in fabulous hats).

Now, two decades after her death, her work will be featured in a new show “Anna Walinska’s New York” at New York’s Union League Club, as a part of a larger exhibition that opens on Thursday, “Celebrating 100 Years of Women Painters.” Her niece, Rosina Rubin, who maintains Walinska’s estate, told Women in the World that her aunt embodied adventure in her life and in her art.

“She was very much into exploration and expression. While she has different periods in her work, if you look at the span of a long period of time, you wouldn’t necessarily [say] ‘this was all done by the same artist’,” Rubin said. Walinska’s wide range of works, from masterful paintings to simple line drawings, present ideas in bold color as well as stark black and white.

The daughter of a labor leader and an activist/poet, Walinska was born in 1906 and was enrolled in the Art Students League 1918 as a pre-teen. Just 19 years old at the height of the Jazz Age, she dreamed of traveling to Paris but her father objected, so she asked his boss (“went over his head, literally” Rubin laughed) for \$2,000, in exchange for a commissioned piece — a take on [Paul Baudry’s *La Fortune et Le Jeune Enfant*](#). It was so well-executed that Walinska’s father kept the piece and took on the loan himself. (It was also so massive that it required an entire large wall to hang, according to Rubin, underscoring the scope of Walinska’s ambition.)

In Paris she lived around the corner from writer Gertrude Stein, studied at the Academie de Grande Chaumier, exhibited at the Salon des Independents and took lessons under French Cubist painter André Lhote. Making the city her home until 1930, she also developed what she called her “calligraphy of line,” that can be seen throughout her work, said Rubin, and was inspired by then-emerging artists Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. “When I was going through her apartment [after her death], trying to categorize all of the art — of which there is quite a bit — and every time I thought I was finished doing it, I’d find something else hidden in a corner,” Rubin recalls. “One day I opened the closet and a box fell down. It was still sealed and had a sticker of the Ile De France on its side: a box of drawings that she had brought back from Paris with her. As I went through it, I found this little drawing and in the lower right hand corner it said, ‘Picasso’. The appraiser came running over and said, ‘Oh no, this is your aunt’s drawing *of* Picasso,” Rubin said, explaining, “When she drew an artist, she labeled it with a signature that looked like the artist she was drawing.”

The current show includes a similar drawing of Mark Rothko.

After the glamour of Paris, which Walinska left amid rising anti-Jewish sentiment in Europe, the artist wasted no time establishing a space for creators back in the U.S. Five years after her return, she founded the Guild

Art Gallery on West 57th in New York where she aimed “to show artists of genuine merit, whether known or unknown, totally independent of commercial consideration,” a space where Walinska gave abstract artist [Arshile Gorky](#) his first one-man show in the city. She once danced flamenco to benefit the Spanish Loyalistas, was represented in the American Artists’ Congress first annual membership exhibition and served as assistant creative director of the contemporary art pavilion at the 1939 New York World’s Fair, before moving in 1942 into the eight-room Upper West Side apartment where she lived and worked until her death in the late 1990s. She married once, a partner who died, and took to raising her nieces — Rosina and her sister — as if they were her own children.



(Left) Anna Walinska in her studio in 1960; (R) A 1936 self-portrait by Walinska. (images courtesy of Atelier Anna Walinska)

One of her most striking feats of independence came in 1955, when Walinska took to the skies, traveling the world on prop planes. She spent four inspiring months in Burma (now Myanmar), where she discovered the handmade Shan paper that became essential to her later collages, attended cabinet meetings and rubbed shoulders with “movers and shakers,” that included elite diplomats like [U Thant](#), who went on to serve as Secretary-General of the United Nations.

During this year of travel, she wrote almost every day in a diary now stored at the Smithsonian Institute. Rubin has studied the journal intensively and said that she “always gets something from revisiting” the pages, but was especially surprised to learn about her aunt’s visit to Tokyo in November

1954 where she saw Matisse cutouts. “I always knew that she was strongly influenced by Matisse from the early Paris years, and like Matisse, [Walinska] did a lot of collage in her later years. But I did not know until I read this diary that she saw this exhibition – and you [can] see its influence,” Rubin explained.

To celebrate the 60-year anniversary of Walinska’s jaunt, Rubin — who transcribed the diary from hard-to-read copies — shared daily memories from her aunt’s trips to countries including Israel, Greece, Italy, India, and Turkey [on Twitter](#). “My aunt, she was always far ahead of her time in the media she used in her work, [so] I thought to myself that if she were still around, she’d be engaging in social media and somehow using the computer in her work,” Rubin said.

Walinska’s identity as a Jewish woman led her to share her first retrospective at the Jewish Museum in 1957 and influenced [her work surrounding the Holocaust](#) — decades worth of painting and drawings that were exhibited at the Museum of Religious Art in the late 1970s before touring the country and finding permanent homes at the Yad Vashem in Israel and the United States Holocaust Museum.

Over the nine decades of her life, Walinska’s work (a catalog that boasts thousands of items) showed at dozens of notable spaces, including New York’s Museum of Modern Art and Metropolitan Museum of Art, and was permanently installed at the National Museum of American Art and the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington D.C.

Posthumously, her art also made its way to Terezin Memorial in the Czech Republic — the first time Walinska’s work was shown in eastern Europe. Rubin’s family line boasts rabbis and “Jewish tradition that was handed down,” but also leaned strongly towards politics and activism (including her grandparent’s work with famed anarchist and family friend Emma Goldman, who lived around the corner in Brooklyn in 1914). “She was a Jewish artist, she was a woman artist. Those are some elements of who she was – but not the totality,” Rubin explained. “There was a real consciousness while being in Europe while [anti-Jewish organizing was] developing. Knowing what was going on there, knowing what was at stake, that was when she started to get involved in doing work on the Holocaust. It touched her very deeply.”

“Anna Walinska’s New York” features 40 works inspired by the city she loved, created between 1918 and 1983, including her oldest known piece, *The Family (1918)* — a watercolor created while a young pupil at the Art Students League — and two portraits of her sister Emily made in 1930 and 1961, works that are realist and abstract expressionist, respectively. A variety of the modernist’s styles on display — some figurative, some abstract — pay tribute to the city that managed to entertain this wanderer for the majority of her long life.