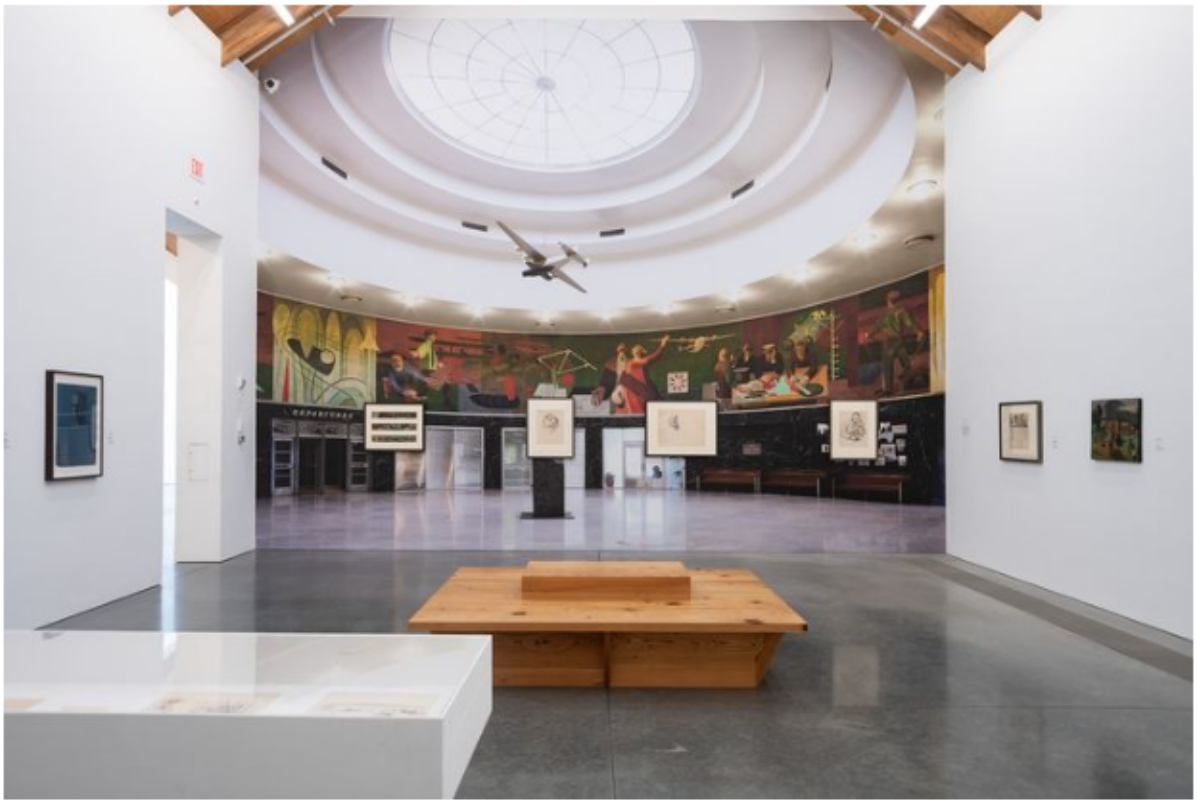
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

‘James Brooks: A Painting Is a Real Thing’ Review: When Life Interrupts Art

Due to his service during World War II, the painter missed the beginning of Abstract Expressionism—but an exhibition at the Parrish Art Museum suggests he was among its finest practitioners

August 30, 2023

by Peter Plagens



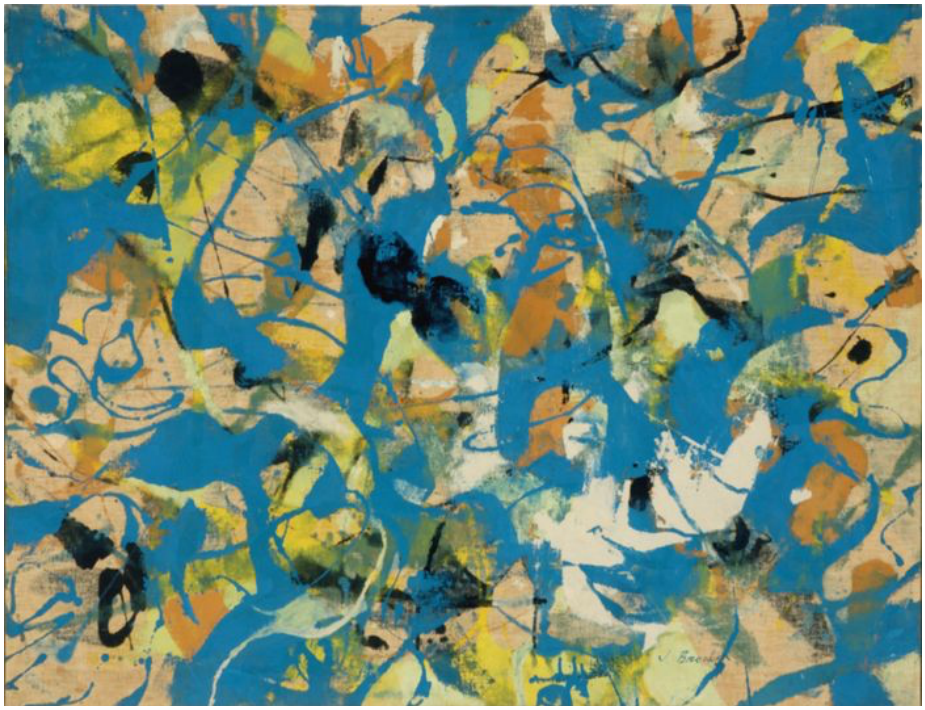
View of a reproduction of ‘Flight’ at the Parrish Art Museum PHOTO: GARY MAMAY/PARRISH ART MUSEUM

‘Many artists have had their annus mirabilis,” says guest curator Klaus Ottmann in the catalog for the concisely beautiful exhibition “James Brooks: A Painting Is a Real Thing” at the Parrish Art Museum through Oct. 15. For Brooks (1906-1992) it was 1947, when during a summer spent in Maine he discovered that painting on Bemis cloth, a crude fabric named for its St. Louis manufacturer, allowed his paint to leak through to the obverse side. “The stains that occurred when I glued paper down to linen after I made the paintings,” Brooks told an interviewer in 1965, “came through on the thin cloth and [created] very provocative shapes. They were new to me. So I started using that more at the time.” From them, Brooks eventually developed wonderful balloony forms, occasionally incised by wandering lines; a limited but crisp palette; and brushwork just active enough to produce a few centrifugal drips. Chronologically, Brooks may be a second-echelon Abstract Expressionist, but aesthetically—with such paintings as the 5 1/2-foot-high “Dolamen” (1958) and the smaller “Obbie” (1973) in this show of over 100 works—he’s just about up there with such founders as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline.

James Brooks: A Painting Is a Real Thing
Parrish Art Museum, through Oct. 15

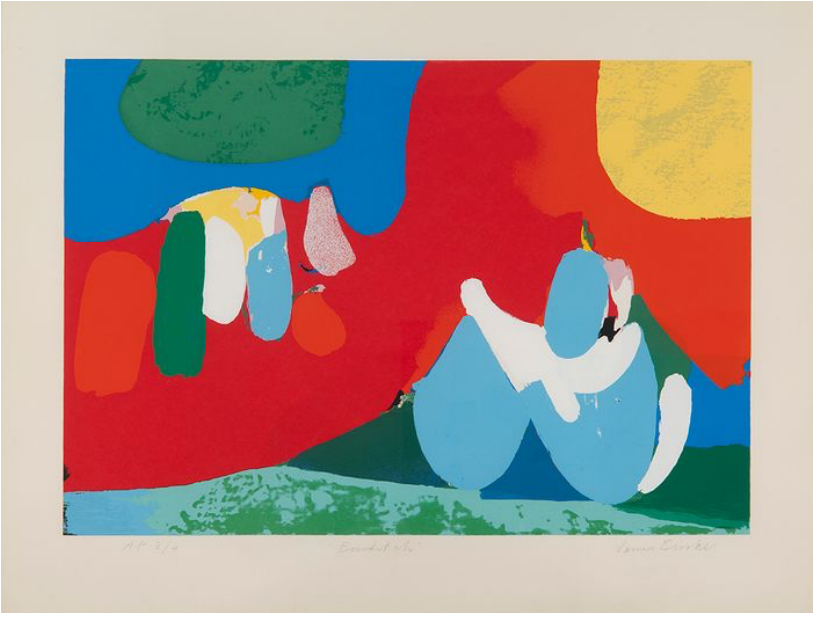
Brooks’s path to abstract painting was somewhat serpentine. Raised in Oklahoma, Colorado and Texas—his father was a traveling salesman—he studied art first in private classes (with a painter who had learned at the Art Students League in New York) and then at Southern Methodist University before transferring to the new Dallas Art Institute. When one of his teachers moved to New York in 1926, Brooks tagged along. He worked for advertising agencies (Brooks was adept at lettering), and starting in the 1930s made and exhibited lithographs in the somewhat mandatory regionalist style of the time, managing to sell one to the city’s public schools. In addition, Brooks was awarded a few Works Progress Administration mural commissions, the most famous being “Flight” at the Marine Air Terminal at La Guardia Airport. (It was whitewashed in 1952 but recovered in the late 1970s, and is represented in the exhibition by small preparatory sketches and by a huge photographic reproduction covering a whole wall at the Parrish.)

Unlike most of the Abstract Expressionists, Brooks was in the military during World War II. He served as a combat artist in the Middle East and was discharged in September 1945. The general order given to military artists in 1943 is one of the more stunning documents in American art history, asking them to depict “the nobility, courage, cowardice, cruelty, boredom of war; all this should form part of a well-rounded picture. Try to omit nothing; duplicate to your heart’s content. Express if you can—realistically or symbolically the essence and spirit of War. You may be guided by Blake’s mysticism, by Goya’s cynicism and savagery, by Delacroix’s romanticism, by Daumier’s humanity and tenderness; or better still follow your own inevitable star.” An NBC war correspondent reported that “Sergeant Brooks found his favorite subjects in the western desert and around the ravaged port of Benghazi—blocks of bombed-out buildings, naked, torn and twisted machinery, with soldiers wandering, stunned amid the destruction.”

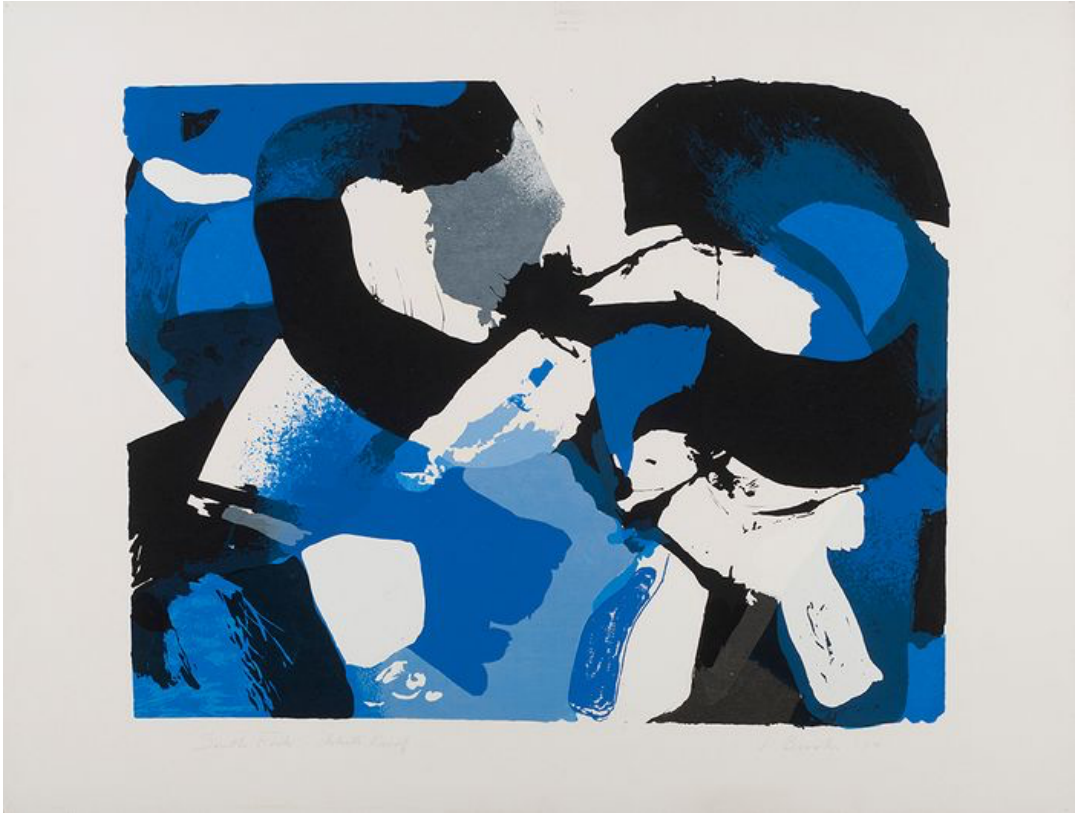


'Untitled' (1952) PHOTO: PARRISH ART MUSEUM

After the war, Brooks, who had been assisted on mural commissions by Pollock's brother Sande, rented part of Jackson's downtown Manhattan apartment when Pollock moved out to East Hampton, N.Y.—in those days, a semi-wilderness. In short order Brooks, who had married another artist, Charlotte Park, followed Pollock and his wife, Lee Krasner, eventually buying a small house in Montauk. After Hurricane Carol destroyed his studio in 1954, Brooks had the house put on a barge and moved to nearby Springs. There, Brooks could work on larger paintings in a big, airy studio he had designed himself. He could afford such an atelier because he'd had sales success in a few European galleries and some of the better ones in New York.



'Bowditch' (1974) PHOTO: PARRISH ART MUSEUM



'South Fork' (1974) PHOTO: PARRISH ART MUSEUM

Although Brooks was much more an original painter than an eclectic one, his oeuvre nevertheless contains individual virtues found in the works of his Abstract Expressionist contemporaries. His color-shapes have some of the expansiveness of Rothko's, his brushwork some of the educated élan of De Kooning's, and his compositions the astuteness of Kline's.

In fact, Brooks's relative neglect reminds us of the too-often-exaggerated importance of chronology over—to employ that perennially discredited term in art criticism—beauty. One thinks of John Malkovich, in that essential movie for artists, "Art School Confidential," sitting surrounded by little paintings on the wall, each one featuring a central hard-edge triangle, and saying to an awestruck student, "I was the first." James Brooks may have been deprived by military service of being among the first Abstract Expressionists but, as this exhibition so pleasurably proves, he was among the very best.