

YVONNE THOMAS



## Yvonne Thomas:

*"I have an urge to enclose the world."*

FOR YVONNE THOMAS painting is all-consuming. From her earliest days in a French boarding school she knew she would be a painter.

Developments in her personal life and her habit of tackling new pictorial problems every four or five years when she felt her work was becoming too safe have made her stylistic evolution unpredictable and complex. Five years work was completely thrown away at one point. Now she "finds herself back in the world of the two dimensional rectangle where the drama truly resides for her." She is back on track and has never painted better in her life.

Yvonne Thomas studied with a descendant of Thomas Cole at Cooper Union. She learned anatomy under Bridgeman and painted with Vytlačil at the Art Student's League, and she took private instruction in painting the nude and portraiture from Dimitri Romanovsky, a reigning expert on both subjects. In the depth of the Great Depression, her parents called a halt to any more art instruction, saying wisely that it was time to find work, so she became a commercial artist. In 1938, literally on the eve of her marriage, she walked out on a successful career as a fashion illustrator. She then studied with Purist painter Amadee Ozenfant and attended lectures on Matisse by Georges Duthuit. This introduction to Modern art was a profound, long-term influence, but its immediate effect on her portrait and landscape paintings was not evident at first.

The big impact on Yvonne Thomas, the force that has carried her through all of her subsequent phases and been the sustaining momentum of her life in art ever since, was the Subject of the Artist school which she attended from its opening day in 1948 through its closing in 1949. She was prime for the experience. Fed up with painting what she refers to as "fake Braques and Picassos," she jumped at her friend Patricia Matisse's suggestion to consider this school. When she walked into Robert Motherwell's huge, light-filled loft on 8th Street that first day of classes, she was overwhelmed by everything—the large scale, the abundant art supplies, and most of all, the warm, closely-attuned and supportive attitude of the instructors: Motherwell, William Baziotis, Mark Rothko and David Hare, and Barnett Newman, who held no scheduled classes but who was often present. She felt that finally she had come home! She was encouraged to work very large (on brown paper which might later be mounted on canvas) and directly from her feelings with no thought about how to make a "good picture." Her teachers rejected the idea of painting actual objects of any kind or any compositional image that pre-existed the painting's execution. Her subjective feelings were to be the only "subjects" she might paint and her teachers helped her to search for them in the forms and colors that were emerging autonomously from her brush. This tremendously exciting time for her was to be reinforced a year or so later by a summer session in Hans Hofmann's Provincetown school.



Baziotes made her realize how deep her underlying commitment actually was to abstraction. She has remained so ever since, and to the subjective expressionism with which her teachers combined it. Motherwell was often amazed at the surprising color notes she was able to make work. Hofmann then reinforced this characteristic, giving her "the courage of color," as she puts it, which has sustained her through all of her shifts of imagery. Over the years her sense of color has often been daring and sometimes amazing, but it has rarely been as full-throated as it is in the works in the current exhibition. Color is the most intimate and idiosyncratic aspect of any painter's style, of course, but Thomas places the origin of her color sense back in the cradle when she was rocked beneath the cloud-like yellow Mimosas, orange trees and a pale green Eucalyptus in her grandmother's Provencal garden. Almost always happy, if not downright exuberant, Thomas's palette is redolent of the beautiful hues of the Cote d'Azur—lemon yellows (like the ones Matisse used in his Vence Chapel), rose pinks, sunny greens, and the azure blues of the Mediterranean sea and sky. She sets them off, as Matisse himself so often did, by passages of black and white, as if in recognition of the fact that the white light and black shadows of the midi are what make the colors there seem so intense. (Georgia O'Keefe, another strong colorist, also credits her earliest color experiences to memories as a baby lying on a quilt.)

In Thomas's earliest abstractions, geometrical units emerge from the welter of brushstrokes as if to provide corners of control. Hofmann encouraged this aspect of her style with his strong Cubist orientation. Even though she never actually painted in a Cubistic manner, many times over the years a loosely-painted square, lozenge or rectangle came to be the primary protagonist in a painting. In her recent work, however, the lozenge, or diamond form has taken over. She has become obsessed with it, no longer feeling that a painting is complete or "works" until it appears. Every one of the major paintings and almost all of the smaller canvases in her current exhibition contain this form. In **Vista IX** it is overlaid by a thin red grid, but in the others it stands forward, clearly the most important element in the picture. In **Memory Field** it encloses an area of warm color which moves up to the picture plane and flattens it despite the blue outside. But more often the four contrasting colors which comprise the lozenge, one to a side, interact spatially with the hues inside and outside of its perimeter. In two of the recent canvases a vertical line running from the diamond's top to its bottom point adds a further complexity by implying the possibility that the diamond is really a perfect square bent in half, its lateral points receding in space. This reminds us that Thomas's gridded paper constructions of the late seventies also incorporated the lozenge, albeit indirectly, when the folded-back corners of the square plane produced that illusion.

Searching for clues to the meaning of the lozenge or diamond form that now so relentlessly insists upon appearing in her work, the artist has been combing through books of symbols. A square tipped on end is commonly used instead of round halos in Medieval depictions of living saints and donors to distinguish them from heavenly personages. Elongated lozenges are



also implied, though not commonly inscribed, within the pointed, almond-shaped mandorla which so often surrounds the Virgin Mary. (This conjunction of forms is probably the source for the modern interpretation of the diamond and the pointed ellipse as feminine symbols.) Tipped-squares or lozenges often appear in 17th Century Dutch paintings, particularly as escutcheons or heraldic memorial plaques installed in the church interiors painted by Pieter Saenradam and Emmanuel de Witte. These were surely a source for Piet Mondrian's use of the tipped-square which enabled him to incorporate the dynamism of the diagonal within his pictures without actually painting the diagonal lines which he had forbidden to his fellow Neo-Plasticists. The diagonal, and by extension the diamond shape, is a dynamically-charged element lying half way between the stable square and the ever-moving circle. It is central to the concept of Dynamic Symmetry as it was defined earlier in the century by Jay Hambidge. It appears in all of Hambidge's compositional applications of the Golden Section and is the core image of the whirling square which sets those compositions into plastic motion.

But none of these meanings or uses of the lozenge are Thomas's, interesting as they may be to her after the fact. As her titles indicate, to her the lozenge implies some sort of "vista" which she sees as both an inner vision and a view through to something outside. **Memory Field** exemplifies the former concept, **Barbara's Garden** the latter. The garden reference is specifically relevant in light of the importance of her grandmother's garden to her sense of color, and generally meaningful in the way that the loosely painted, often atmospheric passages of brushwork in these paintings have an organic or nature-like quality. (John Marin also framed many of his land and seascapes in faceting diagonals.) Other clues to the meaning of this lozenge shape to Thomas may lie in the earlier paintings in which they figured. Its inherent dynamism was stressed in a 1984 painting titled **Kermesse**, probably after a Rubens' painting of the same name picturing a dance festival. In Thomas's canvas two pairs of lozenges seem to pirouette through the picture space. A more somber note was struck in the mid-seventies when the lozenge appeared submerged or almost drowned within horizontal registers of surprisingly muted hues. **Buried Elegies**, 1976, where a single, horizontally oriented lozenge floats amid dusk greens and deep sea blues, might even be appropriate to illuminate a poem by Wallace Stevens about the sea.

But it is far more often the case that Thomas's paintings sparkle, as in fact does their creator. Her color normally has a clear and radiant quality, much like herself. Even though the diamonds she paints are flat, not three-dimensional, one is put in mind of crystals. But then, a crystal, the most geometrical of nature's forms, is both highly energized and energizing and Thomas's paintings are naturally exuberant and full of vitality. The daring color in her recent work is held in partial check by the diamond-shaped enclosures, but the results are far from restrained. Even though a given picture may have cost her a month of daily struggle, all the new paintings have a spring-like freshness and elan that speaks of joy and youth.

—APRIL KINGSLEY