

# OPEN PORTFOLIO

## DOROTHEA TANNING

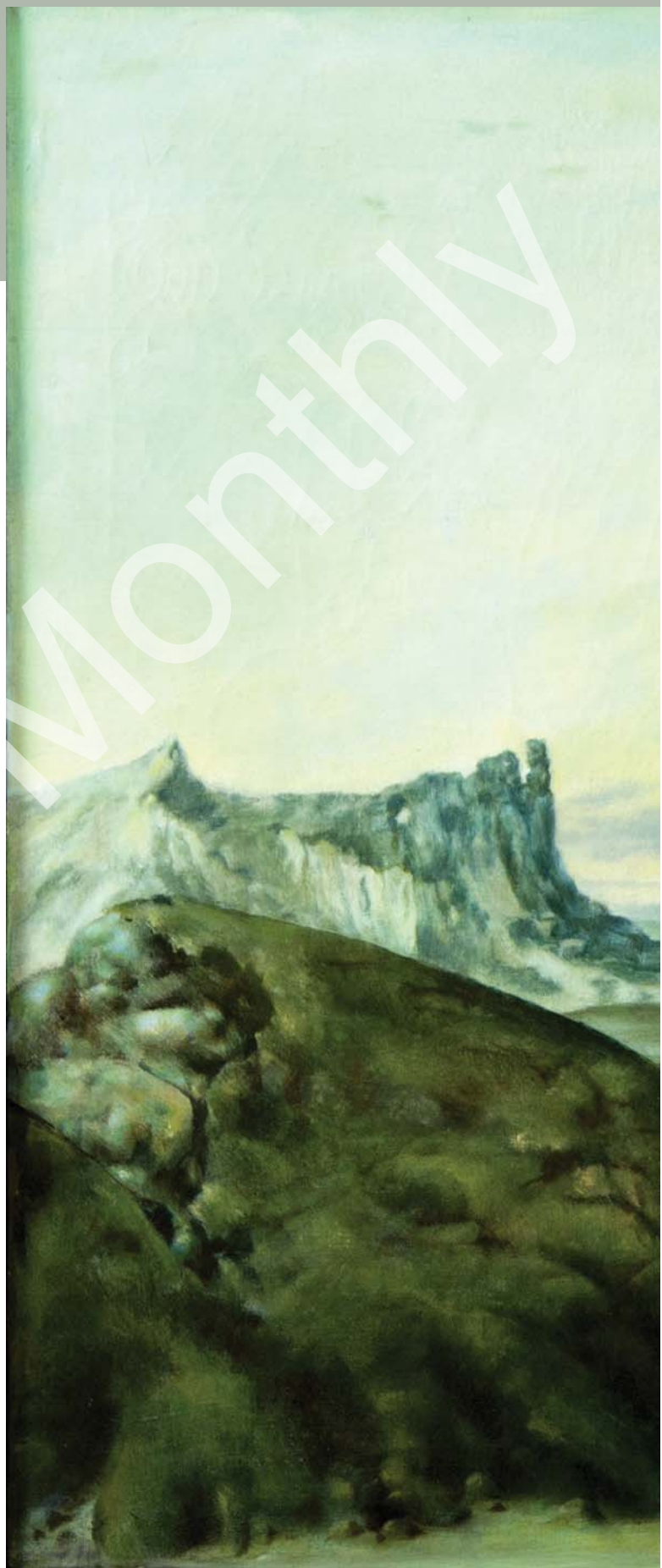
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“Women artists. There is no such thing – or person. It’s just as much a contradiction in terms as ‘man artist’ or ‘elephant artist.’ You may be a woman and you may be an artist; but the one is a given and the other is you.”

The above quote is from Dorothea Tanning. Who better to start this feature off than the artist herself? And what to say about her life and career? The esteemed artist and her husband, German painter Max Ernst, resided in Sedona in a home on Brewer Road for about eight years. They arrived in 1946 and left in either 1953 or 1954, according to her niece Mimi Johnson, who we interviewed for this retrospective. Dorothea died in New York City in 2012. We decided to focus on her time spent in Red Rock Country.

In her book “Between Lives” she writes about her time in Sedona with her husband. She mentions the heat, the natural landscape (in her autobiography, she described Arizona as a “landscape of wild fantasy”) and visits from many prominent figures in the art world including Welsh poet Dylan Thomas and photographer Lee Miller, among many others. She writes their first Sedona friends were notable sculptors Bob and Mary Kittredge. Works she painted in town include: “Max in a Blue Boat,” “Palaestra,” “Maternity,” “Guardian Angels,” “Interior with Sudden Joy,” “The Philosophers,” “A Very Happy Picture,” “Avatar” Dorothea writes, “Sedona, where nothing happened, was happening.” She also wrote the following about Sedona in “Between Lives,” “Reader! Imagine the pure excitement of living in such a place of ambivalent elements. Overhead, a blue so triumphant it penetrated the darkest spaces of your brain. Underneath a ground ancient and cruel with stones, only stones, and cactus spines playing possum.”

In this exclusive Q&A, learn more about her life in Sedona, her artistic work and her as a person. Visit [dorotheatanning.org](http://dorotheatanning.org) for more information.





**This Spread: Tanning, "Self-Portrait," 1944**

Dorothea Tanning © 2021 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris







## SEDONA MONTHLY: Where was Dorothea Tanning born?

**MIMI JOHNSON:** She was born in Galesburg, Illinois, which is a town situated 198 miles south of Chicago. It was a small town.

## How did she become interested in art?

I think as a child, she just drew a lot. She was just plain interested in art. And as a lot of her biographical statements and her two books, "Birthday" and "Between Lives," say, she just was driven to make art. She did lots of drawings since she was a child, and her parents were lovely, and did what they could to encourage her.

## Did she make art throughout her entire life?

That's what she did throughout her entire life. As a young woman, she went to Knox College in Galesburg, but she only spent two years there. She just had to get out of town. And so she moved, around the age of 20, to Chicago. She was there a few years. And she managed to find the art and poetry scene and made friends. And then she went off to New York. And in New York, as a young woman in her 20s and 30s, she supported herself doing commercial art. As a matter of fact, she was an illustrator for Macy's. She did ads for gloves, dresses and all sorts of things. She was a very successful commercial artist.

## What prompted Dorothea's move out to Sedona?

In 1942, she was living in New York, working hard, just staying alive by making commercial art. But at the same time, she was painting her own visions. She had been introduced to some of the most amazing ideas that came out of Europe through a famous exhibition that she had seen in 1936 at the Museum of Modern Art called "Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism." She was totally enthralled by it. So, she's working away as a commercial artist, beginning to get some notice, and she's invited to a party given by a famous art dealer named Julian Levy. And at that party, she meets Max Ernst, a German surrealist painter who has recently come to the United States, as have many other surrealists, because of course, it was during World War II. The rest is history. They fell in love. I think they made an initial visit to Sedona at someone's recommendation. Dorothea had been seriously ill, so they went off to find sunshine. And then they decided in 1946, that they would escape the struggles and the craziness of New York, and move lock stock and barrel to Sedona. They packed up everything and left. Max and Dorothea built a little house. I've seen the pictures. It's nothing like you can imagine today. Max built it himself, basically, with Dorothea's help, and with help of some local people, too. They bought the land on Brewer Road from Charlie Brewer, and Dorothea always told me that she used her meager savings account.

## Tell us about her time in Sedona. How was that important to her career?

Max was already 50, with half of his career behind him. Dorothea is now also starting to develop works that are known and starting to be shown in galleries in New York. But in many ways, although she's been at it for a while, the Sedona years are sort of a new beginning for Dorothea's career. Imagine the two of them at work, separately, obviously – they are not collaborating. Max said that the Sedona landscape, the red rocks and everything were an echo of work that he had already made. Dorothea, on the other hand, continued to paint the visions and dreams she had in spite of being in Sedona. Being in Sedona was magical. Max and Dorothea were newly in love. They were roughing it out there, with the stars, the sun. It was an extraordinary experience. However, I think her work and the dreams that she painted, simply continued ... She was directly affected.

She didn't absorb into her own work. The idea of the landscape, of the native culture – it was there and it affected her and she loved it. But it didn't really change her own work, the way she painted.

## Why is her work considered significant?

Her work is significant because of her insistence upon on the individuality of her dreams. And the fact that her career was so long. She started off being known as a surrealist. But by the time the '50s came around, her work was changing. It was becoming more abstract. For the late '50s and early '60s, she used the word prismatic. Her work became all about painting itself. She became known as an incredible colorist. Just an amazing painter. She could paint portraits. She could make likenesses. But that wasn't her particular interest. It was painting something interior like "Interior with Sudden Joy."



## What was her personality like?

She had a very strong personality. She could be very, very certain about things. She was fun to be with. She was kind. She never stopped thinking about ideas. She read continually, even when she couldn't work anymore. She had a long career as a poet as well. There are two to three published books of poetry out there. The last one, "Coming to That: Poems" (Graywolf Press, Minneapolis) was published just a few months before she died. She wrote all her life, but I think she got really serious about it in her later years. She wanted to write about Sedona and about her life with Max after he died. She did that first. And then she really got very serious about poetry. I think it's an astounding accomplishment – to have made so many different kinds of art. She was totally interested in other art forms. She was interested in music. We would go to the opera together. She loved dance. She was good friends with John Cage and Merce Cunningham, the famous dancer, musician duo. She worked with George Balanchine and designed work for ballets, both costumes and décor. She was a little bit all over the place because her interests were all over the place and because she never stopped learning. I mean, she never ever stopped learning.

## Although she's best known for her paintings, it's interesting that she was involved in other artistic pursuits too.

She was really a good writer. She introduced me to the great classics of English and French literature. She loved Flaubert. She loved George Eliot. She loved Eliot's "Middlemarch." We would discuss a lot of Jane Austen. She had read so much. And so she encouraged my love of English literature. She adored the writing of Vladimir Nabokov. She was

friends with South American writer Jorge Luis Borges. She was very, very interested in literature. And she was a good cook.

**What were some of the best things she cooked?**

Well, she liked to put a lot of cream in everything. Let's leave it at that.

**Any misconceptions you'd like to clear up? Anything you'd like people to know about her?**

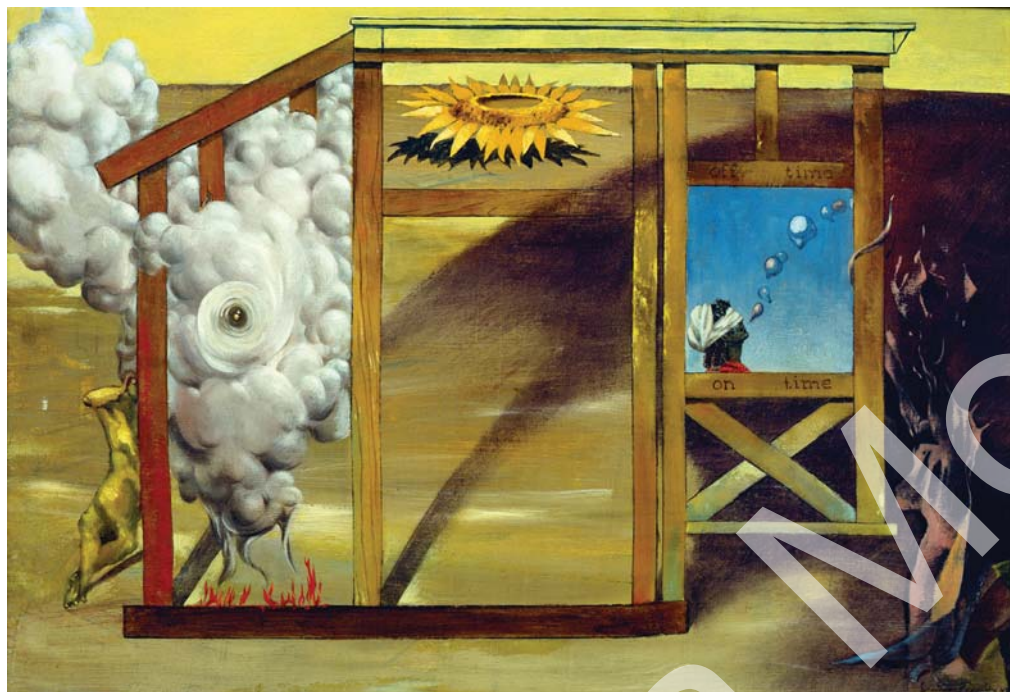
Because Max Ernst was almost 20 years older than she was, there was an idea that she was young and naïve and had no career at that point. But that's not true. She was 32, 33 years old and had been supporting herself

books, all sorts of things. In fact, when she died, we decided to just keep her entire book collection. Because what you find on someone's shelves say a lot about them.

**Any favorite memories of her you want to share with us?**

My memory is that she introduced me to so much that I had absolutely no idea of. I also grew up in Galesburg, Illinois. Yes, you may read books, but you have no idea of the real world out there. You have no idea of walking into Venice and looking at it for the first time. She opened so many doors for me, my sisters and her nephew. We are all so grateful for her and all she

has done for us. She was a wonderful person who cared a lot about her family and at the same time, nobody. She didn't care about anybody as much as she cared about her paintings. She cared about her work, and she wanted more than anything that her work be as widely known as possible. That's pretty much what I could say about her. She was a lot of fun. She was also persistent and tough as nails when her work was concerned. She was an important, important artist.



**Mary Byrd is the chair of the Fine Art Museum of Sedona Board of Trustees and collects Dorothea Tanning's art.**

**SEDONA MONTHLY: How did you become interested in Dorothea Tanning and her work?**

**MARY BYRD:** In 2015, the Sedona Art Museum, which is now known as Fine Art Museum of Sedona, put on a week-long event with the Sedona Heritage Museum that was about Max Ernst and Dorothea Tanning called "When Surrealism Met the Red Rocks." Prior to that, I may have heard of Max, but I really did not know anything about

as a commercial artist and was making her own art at the same time. Max and Dorothea were equals as far as their place in life. He might have had a longer career behind him, but don't ever assume that she was a child at that point. Dorothea was persistent. As a human being, she didn't give up on things. She struggled a lot when she was a young woman. When I think of how easy I had it by comparison. She moved off to Chicago with nothing, all by herself and found a job as a waitress. She managed to get connected with the art crowd in Chicago. She went to Paris. She went to New York. She worked really, really hard. She struggled. She wasn't just handed everything on a silver platter. Her family was not wealthy.

**For her time period, it was not easy for a woman to make a living. Would you consider her to be a pioneer of her time?**

She didn't think of it like that. She was just trying to get ahead. Dorothea always, always, always hated the idea of – She didn't consider that she was fighting for women's art. She was fighting for her art. She never couched it as the community of women fighting the community of men. We know it's true. But that was not her preoccupation. Her preoccupation was always that her intellect be considered as important as it was in relation to whoever, whether man or woman. It's true that most of the known artists and writers she knew at the time were men. We know that. But her preoccupation was just to elbow her way in there and to be respected for her intellect.

**How she did design her houses?**

She would always design her houses with a little bit of fantasy. They were cozy, charming places. People always loved them. They were always bookshelves, filled with books. Lots and lots of books. Those books were not only art books. They included literature, poetry, old fairy tales, all kinds of

Max or Dorothea Tanning. So I am new to collecting Dorothea Tanning. I was attracted to her story. Having grown up in the Midwest and anxious to leave a small town and see the world. And I grew up in the Midwest and have similar thoughts. So I was attracted to her story. And then as I started to look at her art, I really was intrigued by her art. She died at 101 years old in 2012 and was known as the last living surrealist, but her artwork was much more than the surrealist period. She went into all different areas. Some would call it abstract expressionism. She worked in all different mediums: oils, watercolors, pencil, crayon, collage, sculpture. I even have one piece that's sprayed ink and graphite. And besides her visual art, she was an author. She published two memoirs, two books of poetry and a graphic novel when she was much older in life. I think she was a fascinating person, a genius and very undervalued. She is in museum collections all around the world. In 2018 and 2019, they had the very first large retrospective of her work at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Spain and then at the Tate Modern in London. I was fortunate enough to go to both of those exhibits. It was exciting to see about 150 of her works.

**What else drew you to Dorothea's work? Do you feel a connection to her?**

I like the feminine perspective that she gives. I first became interested in collecting the work because she was an important artist who lived and worked in Sedona. As I learned more about her I found out that she was much more than a surrealist artist. I wanted to acquire works in different mediums and from different periods of her life. Each piece had a different story, and each one had elements that attracted me. I resonated with her Midwest upbringing and her desire to see the world. I loved her sense of humor apparent in some of her frieze works (graphite and watercolor on paper). Basically, I wanted to discover as much as I could about her. •



