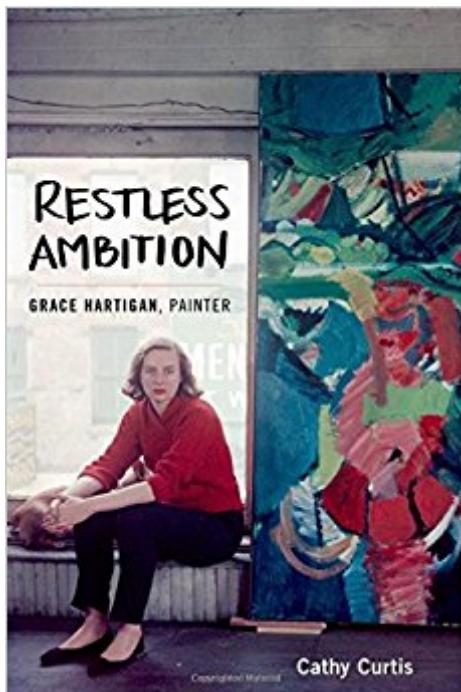


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# Restless Ambition: Grace Hartigan, Painter



## Synopsis

This first-ever biography of American painter Grace Hartigan traces her rise from virtually self-taught painter to art-world fame, her plunge into obscurity after leaving New York to marry a scientist in Baltimore, and her constant efforts to reinvent her style and subject matter. Along the way, there were multiple affairs, four troubled marriages, a long battle with alcoholism, and a chilly relationship with her only child. Attempting to channel her vague ambitions after an early marriage, Grace struggled to master the basics of drawing in night-school classes. She moved to New York in her early twenties and befriended Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and other artists who were pioneering Abstract Expressionism. Although praised for the coloristic brio of her abstract paintings, she began working figuratively, a move that was much criticized but ultimately vindicated when the Museum of Modern Art purchased her painting *The Persian Jacket* in 1953. By the mid-fifties, she freely combined abstract and representational elements. Grace—who signed her paintings "Hartigan"—was a full-fledged member of the "men's club" that was the 1950s art scene. Featured in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Life*, and *Look*, she was the only woman in MoMA's groundbreaking *12 Americans* exhibition in 1956, and the youngest artist—and again, only woman—in *The New American Painting*, which toured Europe in 1958–1959. Two years later she moved to Baltimore, where she became legendary for her signature tough-love counsel to her art school students. Grace continued to paint throughout her life, seeking—for better or worse—something truer and fiercer than beauty.

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## Customer Reviews

\*Starred Review\* With impressive knowledge, empathy, and zesty language, Curtis has written her first book, the first biography of Grace Hartigan (1922-2008), a volatile and determined painter. . . . With perceptiveness and vibrancy, Curtis powerfully conveys the passion, anguish, and intensity of Hartigan's life and work. --Booklist Reviews, February 2015 "Hartigan's life is well worth documenting and makes for compelling reading, encompassing as it does crossroads into wider cultural debates over the conflicted role women such as Hartigan faced as daughter, wife, mother, and lover while seeking to be an artist above all. Curtis gives readers as intimate a look as possible, drawing from numerous published sources, archives, and personal interviews. --Bookslut "Today [Grace Hartigan's] name generally draws a blank. The drama of reading "Restless Ambition: Grace Hartigan, Painter," Cathy Curtis's engaging and thorough biography, is waiting for the curtain of non-recognition to fall. When did it happen, and why? Was it because she was a woman? ... "Restless Ambition" doesn't settle those questions and certainly doesn't present Hartigan as a victim. Maybe that's because, as Ms. Curtis makes clear, Hartigan never saw herself as a victim, even when she was a nobody; she saw herself rather as a woman of destiny, a Joan of Arc." --The Wall Street Journal "In Cathy Curtis's new biography, we learn how Hartigan defied the standards for femininity prevalent during the 1940s and '50s to become a lasting example of the book's title, restless ambition... When we look at Grace Hartigan's paintings, we see how power does become a kind of beauty, though not everyone will say that about the artist herself. Perhaps, though, we need to keep looking. This biography helps us do that." --The Washington Post "With impressive knowledge, empathy, and zesty language, Curtis has written her first book, the first biography of Grace Hartigan (1922-2008), a volatile and determined painter...With perceptiveness and vibrancy, Curtis powerfully conveys the passion, anguish, and intensity of Hartigan's life and work." --Booklist "This spirited biography is the first to chart the career of Abstract Expressionist Hartigan (1922-2008), a painter with as much swagger as any of her male peers...an accessible portrait of a gutsy AbEx figure." --Publishers Weekly "Restless Ambition is a great and easy read. It really peels back the onion about the Abstract Expressionist Movement, seen through the colorful life of one of its gritty female members." --Jim Levis, Levis Fine Art, New York Cathy Curtis brings us a driven, determined, and dedicated Grace Hartigan who, as a rebellious young artist, attained a rare degree of success in the 1950s among the male abstract expressionist painters of the New York School. This expertly researched biography gives us a vivid, insightful, and fascinating glimpse into the world of the well-known artists and writers-including Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and Frank

O'Hara-whom Hartigan knew so well." --Laurie Lisle , author of *Portrait of an Artist: A Biography of Georgia O'Keeffe*, and Louise Nevelson: *A Passionate Life*"A fascinating look at the life of Grace Hartigan, a tough Abstract Expressionist woman artist who drank with the best of the men and had a sexual appetite that equaled the alcohol. Ambitious, driven and wrestling inner demons she abandons her only child for what she believed to be necessary for her life as an artist. Cathy Curtis deals with it all in her inclusive and well documented book."-- Audrey Flack"The combination of [Hartigan's] life and her art as told in this biography makes for a fascinating book which fully justifies the author's passion for her subject...Read this book to learn of life as lived and art as made by a remarkable woman." --The Key Reporter, Svetlana Alpers "At last, a life of the incomparable Grace! Cathy Curtis's biography is as colorful, tough-minded, and incisive as Hartigan's work at its best."--Patricia Albers, author of *Joan Mitchell, Lady Painter: A Life*"Hartigan's life is well worth documenting and makes for compelling reading, encompassing as it does crossroads into wider cultural debates over the conflicted role women such as Hartigan faced as daughter, wife, mother, and lover while seeking to be an artist above all. Curtis gives readers as intimate a look as possible, drawing from numerous published sources, archives, and personal interviews." --Bookslut"Curtis's biography captures the mute stubbornness involved in persisting with life despite its many disappointments." - London Review of Books

The first biography of American painter Grace Hartigan (1922-2008) traces her rise from virtually self-taught painter to art-world fame, her plunge into obscurity after leaving New York to marry a scientist in Baltimore, and her constant efforts to reinvent her style and subject matter. Along the way, there were multiple affairs, four troubled marriages, a long battle with alcoholism, and a chilly relationship with her only child. Attempting to channel her vague ambitions after an early marriage, Grace struggled to master the basics of drawing in night-school classes. She moved to New York in her twenties, befriending Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and other artists who were pioneering Abstract Expressionism. Although praised for the coloristic bio of her abstract paintings, she began working figuratively a move that was much criticized but ultimately vindicated when the Museum of Modern Art purchased her painting *The Persian Jacket* in 1953. By the mid-fifties, she freely combined abstract and representational elements. Grace--who signed her paintings "Hartigan"--was a full-fledged member of the "men's club" that was the 1950s art scene. Featured in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Life*, and *Look*, she was the only woman in MoMA's groundbreaking 12 Americans exhibition in 1956, and the youngest artist--and, again, only woman--in *The New American Painting*, which toured Europe in 1958-59. Two years later, she moved to Baltimore,

where she became legendary for tough-love counsel to her art school students. Grace continued to paint throughout her life, seeking--for better or worse--something truer and fiercer than beauty.

Grace Hartigan was never one of my preferred painters, Abstract Expressionist or otherwise. So I am probably disinclined to be excited by a book about her. But I did read it and it both lowered and increased my opinion of her. She was off-putting and rather mean. She made the most of her ability when she was young and painted some very lovely abstract paintings. Her later figurative paintings are of slight interest (to me and to art history.) She was a far better painter when she was young. Given what Curtis had to work with, she did a good job of illuminating Hartigan's work and social environment. One thing was quite odd though-Hartigan, in the most interesting phase of her life, was very close to the poet Frank O'Hara (whom she dumped for unclear reasons.) In this bio he is not referred to again-not even when he suddenly died when he was 40 in 1966. There is no mention of Hartigan's reaction to his death. This seemed odd to me. Another interesting part of her long life is her on and off friendships with the other female painters of her generation: Joan Mitchell, Lee Krasner and Helen Frankenthaler. I enjoyed learning about their long friendships with each other, both the highs and the lows.

A fascinating, thoroughly researched and highly engaging portrait of an important artist who finally gets her due, thanks to Cathy Curtis's book. I knew little about Grace Hartigan beforehand, but the drama of her life as presented here quickly drew me in. The author strikes a rare balance between, on the one hand, empathy and understanding for her subject and, on the other hand, objective assessment of human flaws and challenges. This biography is multi-dimensional and richly rewarding for the reader.

very informative

Grace Hartigan was a DAME. Drank, smoked, slept around, swore like a sailor. But more importantly she painted with PASSION. Coming of age alongside landmark artists like Wilhem DeKooning, Grace had a long hard slog establishing herself. Not until later in life did anything ever come easily for Grace. Very well written book, and it offers interesting insight into Hartigan's creative process. The story is quite colorful, and Grace Hartigan - although I had never heard of her - had an extremely colorful personality. Sure she could be a joy to be around, but without warning she could also cut people to shreds, including her own family. Grace lived a long and very full life, so

understandably the narrative can drag a bit in spots. However, overall I enjoyed this thoroughly, and recommend this well researched biography to those interested in the seminal New York art scene of the 40s through 50s. Full Disclosure: received an Advance Review e-copy from netgalley.com

Here is an example of indeed being able to tell a book by its cover. This biography is strikingly written; at the same time kudos to the person who made so arresting a jacket design. It is stunning and the book does not let you down. I did not know much about Grace Hartigan. The author excitingly captures the post war 50's era in New York City when De Kooning, Rothko, Pollock & others were just gaining traction and earning success as Abstract Expressionists, comparing ideals during smokes & drinks in affordable Greenwich Village pubs. When art exhibitions were assembled at the time, Grace might be the only female in the group, and was noted as a preeminent talent in national magazines. In life, I am not sure I would have been a fan of hers. Certainly the exciting Manhattan period during which she literally starved for her art, did what needed to just to get by and "lived" the idealism she espoused would have been the time I most would have liked to have known her. "Restless Ambition" is exceedingly well-researched with a compendium of "Grace-isms." [Asked whether she had ever been told she painted as well as a man, Hartigan replies, "Not twice." She referred to one of the men she married as her "meatloaf husband."] At the peak of her fame and just preceding the next switch in Art Movements, Grace moves to Baltimore to become a hausfrau. Due to her high profile, she becomes a big fish in the suburban-like pond of the Maryland Institute College of Art. Could she have killed her career more deftly if she wanted to? She moves to "nowheresville" as far as the art world is concerned for love, and this exacerbates her love of the bottle. The man she marries, a nationally noted scientist, starts losing his mind and deflates her security with secret, outrageous spending. There are interesting accounts from former students. A favorite anecdote from the book happens during this time. Grace Hartigan gives a talk on art to a group during which time her purse containing a bottle of vodka crashes onto the ground. The alcohol seeps onto the floor for everyone present to see and smell. You have to give credit to someone who lives her life with the credo: I am going to do whatever I want to and to hell with everyone else. Then sticks to it. It may be impractical, rude beyond belief, and self-defeating. But if this is your position and you follow through then, however grudging, a level of admiration is deserved. Cathy Curtis' "Restless Ambition" captures this. She also enables a person to appreciate her subject from the safest possible place---a distance. I would buy a ticket when this turned into a film. She had her flaws---who doesn't?---and sometimes flawed individuals make for good reads.

I'm not an artist or an art history major - but I like art and I like reading bios of artists. I was really excited to see this as I have always wanted to know more about Grace Hartigan - beyond her work there were a couple of pictures of her I had seen from the 1950's - always laughing and seemingly really enjoying life. In some ways I wish what my fantasies were more in line with reality - but the credit here goes to Curtis who does not sugarcoat a thing ---I read one review that suggested the narrative bogged down in parts - perhaps. I too was more interested in the 1950's than her later work - but the fact is she had a long life and never quit producing - and it seems like many greats in any discipline it was her and her work that mattered to her more than others at times. I agree also with another reviewer, I hope Cathy Curtis is already at work on another book.

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