

Vita Petersen was born in 1915 to a family prominent in German history and politics. Her mother was the direct descendent of the 18th century Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn; her father was Secretary of State in the 1920's. Her brother, the art historian Otto von Simson, is best known for his iconic study, *The Gothic Cathedral*. Petersen grew up surrounded by the paintings of Cézanne, Degas, Monet and others in the remarkable collection of her grandmother.

Petersen studied at the Prussian Academy of Arts in Berlin with Carl Hofer, the German Expressionist painter, and then at the Munich School of Fine Arts until her teachers were banned by the Nazis. In 1934 she fell in love with Gustav Petersen, a Hamburg businessman. They fled Nazi Germany in 1938 for New York, where their daughter Andrea was born in 1942. The Petersens lived in New York City for the rest of their lives, and spent time in Falls Village, Connecticut and Wellfleet, Massachusetts.

Around 1945, Petersen met the painter Mercedes Matter while their children were playing together in Washington Square Park. The two became lifelong friends. Matter introduced Petersen to the circle of Abstract Expressionists which included Pollock, Krasner, Kline, Guston, Motherwell, de Kooning, Tworkov, Sterne and others. With them she found friendship and common values. Hans Hofmann, who invited Petersen to join his classes in New York and Provincetown, was a formative influence and close friend.

Petersen had her first solo show at the Esther Stutman Gallery in New York in 1958. A reviewer in *Arts* magazine wrote: "There is no doubt Miss (sic) Petersen could be the real thing...an impressive debut." Petersen exhibited in Berlin and New York. During the seventies, she was represented by Betty Parsons. Petersen also exhibited at the New York Studio School, the Washington Art Association in Washington Depot, CT, MB Fine Art in L.A. and NY, and the Rising Tide Gallery in Provincetown, MA. Her most recent show was in 2010 at Mark Borghi Fine Art in Bridgehampton, NY.

In 1964, with Rothko, de Kooning, Noguchi, and other extraordinary artists, Petersen helped Matter found The New York Studio School. Petersen remained an articulate and active force in the school until her recent death at 96. A tireless advocate and an inspiring mentor for students, she was called upon for advice on art, life and even love.

As failing eye sight reduced her ability to differentiate colors, she began painting in black and white. Almost paradoxically she found the greatest happiness she had ever experienced in her studio, producing what may be her best work. Noted long-time friend, William O'Reilly, the last paintings "had a new kind of clarity; they had a resolve that was not as forcefully apparent in earlier work; they had a finish and they had a color that was new to the artist. .. Petersen was unambivalently pleased with this set of work."

Vita Petersen died at home on October 22, 2011.

"Sometimes it is the painting itself which leads the way and I follow."

— Vita Petersen