WOMEN OF WISDOM

TALKS WITH WOMEN WHO SHAPED OUR TIMES

Tatyana Grosman

By Lynn Gilbert

with Gaylen Moore

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Dedication

To the women of the past, who made a difference,
the women of today who keep the goal of equality aloft,
and the women of tomorrow in whom we entrust our future.

— Lynn Gilbert

Tatyana Grosman in her studio, photograph by Lynn Gilbert ©1978, New York City.

Tatyana Grosman

(born 1904, Ekaterinburg, Russia—died 1982, New York City) revived lithography as a fine art in this country when she set up her print workshop, called Universal Limited Art Editions, in 1957 in West Islip, Long Island. She also introduced the European idea of the livre de luxe, a special edition of a book illustrated by an artist. Among the artists who have discovered the print through her enthusiasm and encouragement are Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Helen Frankenthaler, Robert Motherwell, Jim Dine, Larry Rivers, and James Rosenquist, as well as the inventor R. Buckminster Fuller and the poet Andrei Voznesensky. Her studio had a reputation for perfectionism unmatched anywhere else.

WHEN MY HUSBAND had his first heart attack in 1955, I knew I had to make a living. I remember one night, it was about two o'clock in the morning, and I was thinking, What shall I do? I hadn't learned anything, I had no craft. So I said to myself, I have to start something. Probably it will be something I will do for the rest of my life, so it has to be worthwhile for me. I would like to contribute something. Whatever I start, I have to put in it everything, all my life experience, all that I love, and all that I am interested in. I decided I would like to publish. I would like to combine words and images and only words and images that I like.

I came actually from a city named Ekaterinburg, called Sverdlovsk now, on the other side of the Ural Mountains that divide Europe and Asia. We lived on the Siberian side. It was not typical of Russia, no traditional family estates passed down through generations. It was surrounded by emerald and platinum mines and became a wealthy industrial city which was built very fast and grew very fast. The population was mostly adventurers, deportees, miners, and people who had been political prisoners in Siberia and had lost touch with central Russia. These people with imaginations came to the Urals to begin new enterprises.

My father was sent to Ekaterinburg by the Russian government because he was a typographer and they wanted him to start a newspaper so they would know what was happening in Siberia. First, he had the problem of finding typographers to work for him. The men he hired came to work with their families, the wife, the children, and of course there was the goat and the cow. Some of these men who were willing but illiterate, he had to teach. The journalists my father hired had certain kinds of opinions and conceptions, otherwise they would not have ended in Siberia. The paper was a pioneering effort for a young man who was twenty-one. It was lively and well read and very successful.

We led a bourgeois life. We had a nice house and we had many servants. In the kitchen we had eleven people, but there was only one room for them. It was piled to the ceiling with pillows and mattresses. In the evening the maids would take their mattresses and pillows and run around to find a place to sleep. They slept just anywhere, in the den, the dining room and salons. My brother's nyanya slept in the same room with him, and my governess slept in the room next to me.

Winter lasted at least eight or nine months so there was a big to-do for heat. Between every two rooms there was a stove and it had to be fed with wood. There was one person to chop the wood for each stove and one person to put it in.

My education was the same as for most people of this class. The first years, up to seven or eight, you were privately taught. At nine, you went to the gymnasium where Latin and Greek were included and work was assigned like it is in a university—in two weeks you had to read this and that. It was demanding, so we all had tutors.

School was from nine until two o'clock, when the family ate dinner together. Then came the tutors. I had to work until five or six o'clock. After the tutors left, instead of being cozy on the bear rug in my room with my books, my mother, who was German educated, said I had to go to sports. This meant to her shoveling snow even though it was getting dark. It was so cruel. Even today, I remember how my hands were frozen, my legs were frozen, my nose was frozen. But I had a solution. We had a big dog, Babka, and when I was shivering, I crawled in the hut with Babka and Babka kept me warm and licked my face. Then I came home for my music lesson. Somewhere in between sports and my piano lesson I had to do exercises on the piano for half an hour.

My greatest relief was that every year, after the Christmas parties where I ate too much sweets, I got ill. Then I could stay in bed and read. I waited for this moment, always. From the beginning I loved all kinds of books and had read all of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, and all our classics before I was fifteen.

We left Russia in 1918, because of the revolution and uncertainties. We left everything and went through Siberia to Vladivostok and awaited the events. But the events didn't settle. We had expected to go back. That was the moment when money began to be of no value, so my father invested in platinum, gold, emeralds, and pearls, which were easy to carry.

When we went from Vladivostok to Japan the emeralds were sewn into the hems

of our dresses. I had a sailor skirt with big pockets and I had bars of gold in them which were very heavy. I was always afraid the pockets would tear, so I kept my hands inside the pockets and held the fabric very tightly. We went to Japan in order that we could go to school, because my parents were conscientious about education. They put me in a boarding school, the Convent of Sacre Coeur in Tokyo. My parents didn't mind my being at a convent because they never felt Jewish. They converted to Calvinism, I suspect, because in Russia there were restrictions where Jews could live and work. In Russia, being Jewish was only a religion. It was much later that Hitler established Jews as a race. The convent had great style, mystique. We wore black veils and went to church three times a day. Certain days we had to contemplate and were not permitted to talk at all. Actually, I liked it very much.

We were in Japan just waiting to see what was happening in Russia, but after a year my parents decided we had to have a better education. In my father's mind the schools in Switzerland were the best, but we were only able to get transit visas to Italy. When we got off the boat in Venice my parents still hoped to go to Switzerland. It was apparent that the visas would be very difficult to get. As my mother's family lived in Dresden, we decided to visit them and see what was doing in Switzerland. We went to Dresden and never left.

Life was very difficult for me in Dresden, very difficult. It was too petit bourgeois, too small, too narrow. Strangely enough, what I learned at the convent in Tokyo, the silence, was very close to my nature. I stopped talking for two years. I don't mean I didn't ask anybody to pass me the tea sometimes, but I was not interested in talking to anyone. There was nobody to talk to, so I just read.

In Dresden there was always vacation time when I traveled with my mother. She was addicted to spas. When spring came we had to go to the spas in Czechoslovakia to rinse the liver. Three times a day you went to the source to drink. You drank this kind of water and that kind of water. You walked around and then at four o'clock you changed your clothes.

My father felt I was too curious, too controlled, and my mother felt this inhibited

her spirit. I was an introvert and it irritated her terrifically. She was very frivolous, very coquette, very pretty, very small and round and had blond hair. Every time we were on the train on a trip, my mother found a gentleman who was interested in her. For my mother it was embarrassing that I was so silent, so tall and thin, but I accepted her. I didn't know another mother.

When I graduated from the Lyceum in Dresden, I went to the Academy of Applied Arts. I studied art there and at the botanical gardens, where I went to draw flowers. It was very satisfying. It was very pleasant to be alone in the sun with the flowers and plants. Today I still have very strong feelings about botanical gardens.

While I was at the Academy I met Maurice Grosman, an artist who had finished the school, but had his studio there. I had seen him before at the Cafe Zunz, which had a few tables in the back and was a place where artists and intellectuals met. I saw him again at a ball. Every year in Dresden there was the famous Jester's Ball. Everyone dressed up in costumes and there was good music. People came from all over Germany. The very wealthy, society and industrial people, were there and I was dragged by my mother. I always felt misplaced. When I danced with Maurice there, for the first time, it was so natural, there was never any doubt. I knew that he would be my husband.

What my parents felt about Maurice is a long, sad story. They didn't want him to be my husband. I left home because my mother was quite rude to me when she talked about him, and I didn't want to be exposed to those scenes. He belonged to a group of artists who were very, very bohemian, who had no money, only friends and admirers. When I married my husband in 1931, they never accepted him at all. Ever. It wasn't only that they didn't accept him, but my mother made life very difficult for us. A certain family offered us an apartment, the little servants' quarters in their big house. It was very comfortable and nice, but we never got it because my mother said to them, "With every newspaper it will be known that you have a Jew in your house and an awful person." We went to live in Paris. We made friends in the cafes of Montparnasse with painters—Lipchitz, Chaim Soutine, Ossip Zadkine.

In certain ways perhaps I found my life liberated. There was no more etiquette and demanding traditional life at home. I had no servants and had decided never to have any. I didn't like the way they were treated. It was simpler just to make my own omelet. But I still didn't fit into this bohemian life. My husband's artist friends resented me. They felt an artist who marries a girl from a wealthy family should not have a spoiled wife who had no money. Life should be for the better. But my husband always felt we were better off than anybody else, no matter how poor we were. With his great generosity and camaraderie, he always helped others. When we didn't even have a piece of bread or a penny, he would say, "Tomorrow will take care of itself."

In 1933, Larissa, our daughter, was born. When I had to leave the hospital, I sat bundled up on the steps of the hospital with my baby, while my husband went running around trying to borrow money. He finally collected money he was owed from a friend in a cafe and we were able to take a taxi home.

When Larissa was still a baby, my husband's younger brother, who was in such fragile health he could hardly walk, wanted to get out of Poland to study. Well, he succeeded. He came to us, but I couldn't take care of a baby and a sick boy. My husband took him to a doctor, but he

was too ill and the doctor wouldn't take care of him, so my husband brought him to the hospital and he died. I suppose I felt I would be punished because I didn't take care of another mother's child.

When Larissa was sixteen months old, I decided I wanted to leave her for a few hours a day in one of those homes where the mothers who work could leave the children. I wanted her to be among other children, and I wanted to be free to help my husband in his work. She needed a vaccination to be admitted. The vaccination was given one morning and in the evening we were having dinner . . . she had just fallen asleep and suddenly I heard a kind of scream. We ran into the bedroom, and I saw she had a kind of cramp. I picked her up, but she was unconscious. We

took her to the children's hospital and they said to leave her here and come back tomorrow. I would have preferred to take her to a doctor, but it was very difficult to have your own doctor in Paris. You had to pay and pay, to cultivate your own doctor. You couldn't just call a doctor from the telephone book, or use the next-door neighbor's doctor. So I left her in the hospital. Early the next morning we rushed there. Maurice had wanted to take a toy, but I said, "Come. Later you will take a toy." When we got there she didn't exist anymore.

When Larissa died it was a great void. I remember I had to physically hold something, because she was still very small and I was used to carrying her around. I reproached myself and felt perhaps we should have kept her at home. You never quite get over the death of a child. The loss is not just for the child itself. Sometimes I think how old would she be, how would it feel to have a daughter of that age. I feel I am ageless now. I have no measure of comparison. I have only my work, That is what interests me, and what I do for people and also what they do that I would like them to do.

When Larissa was born, my parents should have helped me, but I didn't want them to because they would have wanted to take me home. I also couldn't go back to Germany because I foresaw the Nazis. I knew it. War did come and because we were Jews, we had to leave Paris. We were trying to go to America and had reached Marseilles and were living near there when Maurice was arrested. I didn't know where he was. Suddenly I received an envelope, it was a little note from him saying, "I am with this boat." The boat was in Marseilles being painted and it was used as a jail because the prisons were too full and couldn't hold the six thousand Jews who had been arrested. He was kept in the hold of the boat with the rest of the people and I don't how he came out on deck. He said to one of the painters, "My wife doesn't know where I am, would you kindly give her a note?" The painter, continuing to paint, stretched out his leg and said, "Put it in my shoe." My husband bent over and slipped it in.

I learned that the people on the boat would be sent to a camp, or, if you had fifty thousand francs, to an assigned residence where you were free but had to report

to the police every day. Maurice didn't have the money but said he did. A sculptor friend offered all his money if Maurice was asked by the authorities to show it, but he wasn't. He was sent to Alzon, a very small place, maybe a hundred people. In the meantime I was promised visas for the United States and we had to report to the American consulate in Marseilles. On that basis I got a permit that said Maurice could pass through all the little towns on the way there. When we got to the consulate, a man there said, "Well, we have all the papers but one. We need a paper from Paris that says you never had a criminal record." I had never heard of such a thing. Paris was already occupied and I felt it was dangerous to wait any longer. I said, "Maurice, we will leave without the papers, just as citizens of the world." I wasn't going to give up my life because a paper wasn't there.

After that we had many narrow escapes from the police and the Gestapo. Sometimes I didn't think we would be able to get away. Some friends helped us to get to the Spanish border. We knew if we could get to Spain we might be able to get visas, but first we would have to cross the Pyrenees on foot. My husband did not want to go, but I felt this was something we had to do. Maurice carried his easel and paint box so we would not look suspicious, and I wore my fur coat. Everything else was left behind. Our only document was a copyist's permit Maurice had gotten from the French Ministry, to copy art in museums. Once a guardia civil stopped us, but Maurice had seen him coming, gotten out his sketch pad, and begun drawing a tree. Maurice just held up his copyist's permit and the guard went on. Somehow we always found food to eat, places to sleep. I was happy during our walk. I was never afraid. I felt free.

In Barcelona we finally got visas to the United States. When we arrived in New York in 1943 many of our friends were already there—Lipchitz, Zadkine. Ossip Zadkine helped us find our studio apartment on Eighth Street. Maurice painted, and gave lessons in drawing and painting to make money. He taught himself to make silk-screen prints—he made prints after well-known modern paintings and we sold them to Marlboro Book Shops.

We lived in the studio on Eighth Street, but we had friends on Fire Island who in the summer would invite us for weekends. One day we were standing at the ferry

in Bay Shore. It was so lovely and nice. I said to Maurice, “Why don’t we come out here, perhaps we can find a room with kitchen privileges for the summer.” So one day we took the train for Bay Shore but we got off at Babylon, the stop before. We looked all around for a room with kitchen privileges, but there were too many dogs and children and ladies cooking. My husband said, “Let’s go home. You see this is not for us. It’s also too expensive.”

I said, “Listen, we are already here for the day. Let’s spend this one day in the country. We’re here and we can’t afford to come again. This will be the only day we have here, so let’s stay and see it through.” We walked out on the road near here—Montauk Highway—and my husband was grumbling, “I want to go home. Why are you dragging me here?” I started to walk, determined.

After just a few steps. a car pulled up and stopped. It was a big limousine. A man dressed in a blue suit opened the door and said, “I cannot see people walking on the road. Kindly get in and take a seat.” So we got in. Then he asked, “Where can I take you?” I said, “To the next bus stop.” “What are you doing here?” And we told him. In the meantime we passed a big white mansion and he pointed and said, “I live here.” He took us to the bus stop, let us out, and started to turn the car around. Then he stopped and said, “Listen, if you don’t find anything by this evening, come and see me. Perhaps I can help you.” And he drove off.

That evening we took a bus to the gentleman’s house, and he was outside, working on the rose arbors. He said, “Oh, there you are. You didn’t find anything?” We answered no, and he said, “Wait.” He went into the house and came back out with a little key and said. “Follow me.” He took us here, to this little house. It was the gardener’s cottage. Upstairs he showed us the bedroom. We looked out the window at the garden and the woods—it was all so lovely. He asked, “Do you like it?” We did, but we were afraid it was going to be too expensive. Sensing this, the man said, “Would fifteen dollars a month be too much?” “No,” we answered, “that we could afford.”

It turned out that the mansion belonged to the Dominican order and that the gentleman was a Dominican brother. The house became 5 Skidmore Place and we

came here in the summers and invited our friends. Then, in 1955, Maurice had a heart attack and was very ill. It was very serious for a while and he couldn't go out and he couldn't walk. I brought him out to Long Island and we gave up the studio on Eighth Street. I put a Do Not Disturb sign on the door and then went out to try and get the five dollars for the next day somewhere.

My husband was a painter, and a very good painter, and through most of our life together it was his work that interested me, that was my life. So what was I to do? I sold some of his paintings and then later he did silk-screen reproductions of certain artists: Picasso, Miro. . . . But I didn't really like the silk-screen process—maybe it was just the smell—and then one day William Lieberman, the curator of prints at the Museum of Modern Art, explained to me the difference between work made without the artist's collaboration—reproductions—and original prints, in which the artist himself creates the image on the stone or plate.

I thought, It takes so much time and it's only a reproduction. Why do a reproduction? Why not try to do original work? After that I knew what I really wanted was for the artist to work personally.

Then, by some miracle, somebody said to me, "Mrs. Grosman, the stones in front of your house are lithographic stones. If you take them out, you will see." I found them and I had the idea that I could use these stones to make a book. My real passion had always been books, books with visual images. I had just read a book that inspired me very much, Monroe Wheeler's Modern Painters and Sculptors as Illustrators. Wheeler told about artists doing graphic work to illustrate books of poetry. Many French artists had done that. He wrote that the ideal thing would be for the artist and a poet to work together on a book, and that seemed like a wonderful idea.

Soon afterward, Maurice and I drove out to Southampton to see Larry Rivers. We had known him since 1950, when we met on a ship going to Europe. I talked to Larry about my idea of a book that would be a real fusion of poetry and art. Larry listened very carefully and then called out, "Hey, Frank," and down the stairs came this nice young man in blue jeans. It was the poet Frank O'Hara. And so it

was decided on the spot that we would do a book together, artist and poet working together on the same surface. That is how things have happened to me in my life: they just work out somehow.

Some neighbors had an old lithography press they were not using anymore and they sold it to me for fifteen dollars. After finding the lithographic stones in our yard, we found more in many other places, including a former bullet factory on Greene Street in New York; it was a place that had changed hands many times. Probably once it had been a lithography plant, because there were so many stones lying around. The present owners were happy to get rid of them.

Frank and Larry started to work and, after two years, we published a portfolio of lithographs called Stones. But Larry was very impatient and if Frank were not around he would draw on stones that were not part of the portfolio. I would have the printer do small editions of these stones and that's how I started to do single editions. Originally I had thought of doing only books.

It was really the lithographic stones themselves that gave me the idea of using lithography to make books. I like stone—it is a natural element. I like to see something drawn on stone. It does not have the coldness of a metal plate.

The technical aspects of printing are not really important to me. Even today I don't know anything about lithographic techniques. The way we work is very simple. The artist makes his drawing on the stone, the printer makes a proof, and then the artist decides what he likes or doesn't like and then makes changes. I might make some suggestions, and we select the paper. The most important thing is that the print be alive. It must have the heartbeat of the artist in it.

The stone itself imposes, inspires, limits. The grain is always slightly different, one is rough and one is gentle. Some stones are gray like granite, some more sand-colored, and one has beaten edges, another smooth. No two stones are alike. The stone is given to the artist in the studio—Rauschenberg likes to work in the living room at a specific table, Jasper likes to work in a little patio, where he sits on the floor.

The artist is the author of the image on the stone. Rauschenberg in particular has a special feeling for the surfaces and the edges of the stones, the elements he works with. When he is working, Rauschenberg is very inventive and always brings something new to the medium. He spends one day and leaves a month's work. Jasper, on the other hand, is meticulous but he never knows what he wants until it is there.

The printers are the interpreters and can interpret the stones in various ways. It takes two years for the people who work here to understand how we work. There is no rush. Most of the printers who work here were just drifting along from one job to another, searching for I don't know what. But here they have the feeling they are growing and participating. That's very important. You see, each print from the artist is a new question to be solved, a new challenge to be faced, a new adventure. We don't repeat ourselves, so it is very exciting for them. The printer must know exactly what he is doing, he must feel the print. He must have the technical knowledge, like a dancer, to know when to jump and when he has to be very light. Sometimes I say to the printer, "Be very gentle and delicate here, but here make it strong and sparkle." I don't like a print to smell of sweat, hard work. It is hard work, perhaps, but it shouldn't show.

Paper is the fabric of the print. It can be rough or smooth, white or off-white; it can have big margins or narrow margins. It can be a great inspiration.

Then we have the mission of the image. A print is not a drawing or a poster. A poster has a message that you have to see in a split second, sometimes passing by car, on the way to the train. The message has to be clear. But a print is very intimate; it is the rapport between the artist and the stone. Always between the idea and the execution of a print something happens. I don't know what. Sometimes you see that the artist does not realize that between making a drawing and making a print there is a difference. It must not be rushed. Sometimes it is good just to let an edition sit for a while and maybe the artist will add something or take something away. I think it is my responsibility to make sure that the artist should never have any reason to regret what he has done. Once an edition is out, it cannot be recalled. It is an example of an artist's work that is in many places at

once, all over the world, so it is usually seen by more people than one painting or one drawing.

All these years I have worked only with people I wanted to work with, people I was interested enough in and I felt I could introduce to a different medium. I observed their work for a while because I never jump into an adventure. I watched Jasper Johns for two years before I had the courage to approach him. I saw his show at the Modern and twice at Castelli. His work was irresistible, so I wrote him a letter. I assumed I would have an answer in three days. One day from here to New York, one day he would reflect and another day I would have my answer. I waited and waited and felt every ship was burned. I was completely lost. It had to be Jasper Johns or my life was ended, finito!

Perhaps a week later he called from South Carolina to say he had received my letter and that as soon as he came back to New York he would see me. A few days later he called to say he would come at this and this time. So I was sitting at that time waiting for Jasper Johns. I didn't know how he looked. Suddenly in dashed this adolescent boy who says, "Can you tell me where I can find 5 Skidmore Place?" I thought, Oh God, what does he want from me? I wait for Jasper Johns. I said, "This is 5 Skidmore Place." He looked at me and said, "My name is Jasper Johns." I couldn't believe it, this kid was Jasper Johns.

It is interesting to work always with the same artists. They grow and develop and give me a part of their life and development. That's what my life is about. I never thought in terms of making money, but I wanted what I did to have a solid base, and then to build step by step. When there is a crisis, I always do the same thing. I do nothing. I wait and then life picks up. I can't say, "It is better to do that, no matter what." That doesn't exist. It is very strange, but something comes along that gives me courage. It is like an invisible hand and it guides me. Then I hold on to that and I feel that is the way to follow. Then the responsibility comes. In my case there are the artists, the printers, the curators of the museum who exhibit, the journalists who have to write. There is a complete company, an army of people who have to be stimulated, supported, so whatever happens then, it has to be right, it must work by itself.

PARTICULAR PASSIONS

recounts the rich oral histories of pioneering women of the twentieth century from the fields of art and science, athletics andlaw, mathematics and politics.

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