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Art

At 98, Beloved Painter Lois Dodd Is Still Gaining Momentum

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Sep 16, 2025 9:41AM

For almost eight decades now, Lois Dodd has been following her own path in the art world. Immune to passing trends and the trappings of fame, the artist has been driven only by her desire to observe and reflect the world around her. Although she began painting in the 1940s and was a key figure in New York's post-war art scene, it wasn't until 2012 that she (at the age of 85) had her first major solo exhibition at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City. Today, however, her paintings are held in prestigious collections including those of MoMA, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Smithsonian, and they invite fierce competition at auction. When *Reflection of the Barn* (1971) sold at Christie's for \$378,000 (nearly five times its estimate) in October 2024, it set the third successive record for the artist's work in the space of a year.

And yet this remarkable painter, now 98 and still working almost every day, remains largely unknown outside the U.S. Hopefully, that will change this autumn, as the Kunstmuseum Den Haag, in The Hague, Netherlands, presents "Lois Dodd: Framing the Ephemeral," which runs through January 4th. As the first European retrospective of her work, this revelatory survey brings together almost a hundred paintings from the 1950s to the present day. "In some ways, she could be seen as one of the most important artists of our time," suggested David Breslin, curator of Modern and Contemporary art at The Met, in an illuminating documentary filmed to accompany the exhibition. This long-overdue showcase should help explain why.

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Lois Dodd's subject matter

Dodd has always insisted on the simplicity of her practice, maintaining that she just paints what she sees. And it's true that her subject matter might seem unremarkable at first glance. Trees, flowers, windows, doorways, and laundry lines are common motifs, mostly drawn from the immediate surroundings of her homes in rural Maine and New Jersey, or her apartment in lower Manhattan. But beneath their quotidian surface, these exquisitely observed works are spatially sophisticated, lyrical, and utterly compelling. Hovering in the space between abstraction and figuration, they are the result of a lifelong dedication to the act of looking.

Whether it's a shadow on a wall, the reflection in a mirror, rain on a windowpane, or ice melting on a river, her paintings capture brief, unrepeatable moments. Each one is carefully framed and executed with swift, economic brushstrokes and thin layers of paint, generally in a matter of hours. She often returns to the same scenes over the course of many years, at different times of day or season, recording small variations in light and atmosphere. For Dodd, a dedicated plein air painter who never works from photographs or preparatory sketches, the subject is not so much *what* she is painting, but how it exists in that moment.

The exhibition, which is organized thematically rather than chronologically, traces the various themes that recur throughout her work and is full of such ephemeral moments. In *Light Reflected on Brick Wall, December* (2014), for example, she captures the shadow cast on her apartment wall by a fleeting instant of winter sunshine. In *Snow Patterns* (1985), streaks of falling snow are etched across the facade of a gray barn, while in *Burning House, Lavender* (2007), a controlled blaze organized by the local fire department rages through an abandoned building, flames pouring from the windows while wisps of smoke skitter across the rooftop. Elsewhere, there is an entire room of nocturnes from the 1970s in deep shades of blue, silver, and black. These works capture the play of moonlight and shadow over the landscape, distilling its forms into stark contrasts of darkness and light.

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Walking from room to room, encountering the same scenes and motifs again and again, offers a window into Dodd's world. One cannot help but be impressed by the consistency of her vision over so many decades. As Louise Bjeldbak Henriksen, the show's curator, explained to Artsy, "She notices what tends to pass most of us by, and by making us privy to her observations, she teaches us a new way of seeing. Her paintings reward us for approaching them with the same attentive looking with which she made them, while their stillness and clarity offer an antidote to the speed and noise of our present moment, making them feel all the more relevant today."

Dodd's artistic career

Dodd was born in 1927 in Montclair, New Jersey. The youngest of five daughters, she lost both parents by the age of 17, which perhaps helped foster the fiercely independent spirit that would shape much of her life and career. From 1945–48, she studied textiles at the Cooper Union in New York City, where she met the painters Alex Katz and Jean Cohen, both of whom would become lifelong friends. She also met the sculptor Bill King, to whom she would briefly be married.

In 1952, she made her mark as the only female founding member of the legendary Tanager Gallery, the first of several co-op galleries that sprang up on East 10th Street in lower Manhattan during the '50s and '60s. These artist-driven spaces offered an avant-garde alternative to the more conservative venues of Madison Avenue and 57th Street, and they were situated in the heart of the burgeoning post-war art scene, at the nexus of Abstract Expressionism, Pop art, and Minimalism. Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston, and Ludwig Sander were just a few of the gallery's regular visitors. Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg both exhibited there, while Andy Warhol had his work rejected by the gallery on three separate occasions.

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Dodd, however, would set herself apart from these new movements, acknowledging their importance while preferring to follow her own artistic instincts. As she points out in the documentary, "I never got into total abstraction. But I see abstraction, and [it] is very important to me. But I think all painting is abstract, period." Henriksen expanded on this idea, explaining that "she absorbed the lessons of modernism, but filtered them through an observational lens distinctly her own. Her compositions distill forms to their essentials. . . She simplifies form, flattens space, and balances shapes, preserving in paint the feeling and atmosphere of her surroundings as much as their visual representation."

The influence of abstraction

While her work bears comparisons with other American artists such as Edward Hopper, Arthur Dove, and Georgia O'Keeffe, and even European painters like Johannes Vermeer or Vilhelm Hammershøi, the figure she most often cites as an influence is Piet Mondrian. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Kunstmuseum, home to the world's largest collection of the Dutch master's work, is taking this unique opportunity to place the two artists in dialogue, displaying a selection of his paintings alongside Dodd's. However, as Henriksen points out, the two painters have very different approaches. "Where Mondrian sought abstraction through construction, Dodd finds it in the underlying structures of the observed world."

Thus, her paintings often develop out of abstract elements she finds close at hand. In the show, this is evidenced through *Sun in Hallway* (1976), where the view through a doorway becomes a series of geometric color bars, or the oval shape of a mirror in *Springtime Studio Interior* (1972). Even the stark, geometric alignment of walls and shadows outside her apartment window, as seen in *View of Cemetery + Men's Shelter* (1967), turned into an inspiration. In her matter-of-fact way, Dodd explained in the documentary that "I just liked the shape of that rectangle out there, so I started painting it over the years. . . It would change radically according to the season, according to the hour, and so it became a great subject matter for me."

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"I think it's all about geometry," she remarked in a recent interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist (reproduced in the exhibition catalogue). "Even the trees outside, inside. Wherever you are, it's all about geometry." This is especially true of her window paintings. Since 1968, window frames of every shape and size have been one of her most enduring motifs, often painted to scale and employing skillful trompe l'oeil effects, and there is at least one in every room of the exhibition. These "Mondrian Constructions," as she has called them, deftly explore the tension between the rigidly structured grid of the windowpanes and the layers of abstraction found within the glass. Works such as *View Thru Elliott's Shack Looking North* (1971) invite the audience to decipher the complex interplay of reflections, refractions, shadows, and distortions in order to make sense of what they are seeing.

Overdue recognition

All of this invites an obvious question: Why did it take so long for Dodd to achieve recognition? For Henriksen, one explanation is that her tenacity and refusal to compromise her personal vision have been both a strength and a hindrance. "By eschewing fashionable movements—whether Abstract Expressionism, Pop, or Conceptual art—she positioned herself outside dominant post-war narratives, which partly explains her long underrecognition, especially internationally. In recent years, however, there has been a broader reappraisal of overlooked women artists and those who quietly persisted outside the spotlight. And her work resonates very strongly in this context."

Even now, approaching her centenary, Dodd retains the independent streak that has marked her career. Immune to any attempts at interpreting or theorizing her work, she is content to have simply done her own thing and has no advice for young painters except that they try and do the same. "I can't remember anybody giving me advice," she wryly told Obrist, "and if they did, I wouldn't have taken it anyway."