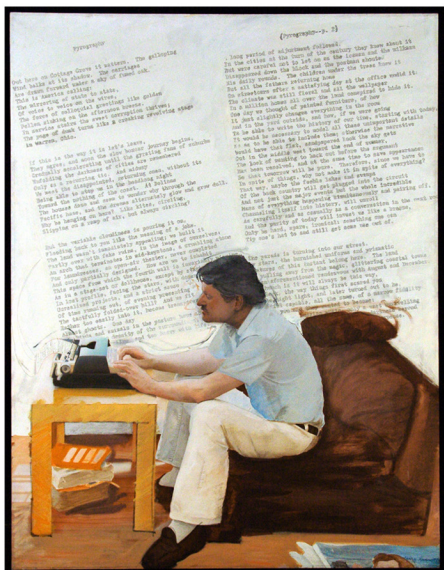


When Art Dallied With Poetry on 53rd Street

By HOLLAND COTTER

I don't believe in golden ages, but I do believe in golden moments. Culturally speaking, New York City has had its share, and one began at the end of 1950 when Tibor de Nagy Gallery opened on 53rd Street near Third Avenue in Manhattan.

To the casual passer-by the undertaking couldn't have looked auspicious. The gallery was in a dumpy tenement several blocks from the glamorous art hub of 57th Street and Fifth Avenue. Most of its artists were



young unknowns. And who was Tibor de Nagy? A refugee banker from Hungary with a fancy pedigree but little cash, and a single New York accomplishment: he was a founder — along with a bulky, Buffalo-born leprechaun of a puppeteer and art fanatic named John Bernard Myers — of a children's marionette theater.

The new gallery with his name had other curious features. It was showing modest portraits and still lifes at a time when abstract painting, the bigger the better, was considered the advanced style. It had female artists on its roster, quite a few. Most eccentrically, the owners, de Nagy (pronounced de NAHJ) and Myers, seemed as interested in new poetry as they were in new art, and were producing a line of books combining the two.

As odd as the package was, it worked. Almost instantly, in the still-small New York art world, Tibor de Nagy's openings were a smart place to be, and its artists and writers — Larry Rivers,

Grace Hartigan, Frank O'Hara — were figures to spot around town. The gallery had arrived.

Six decades later, in a different location and with different personnel, it's still around to tell the tale. And that's what it's doing in a tangy New York moment of an anniversary show called "Tibor de Nagy Painters & Poets."

In retrospect, that the gallery's debut was successful is really no surprise. De Nagy and Myers had plenty of help. After their marionette theater went bust — the polio panic kept audiences away — they wanted to start a gallery, and Myers, a born networker, found a backer in a British-born artist and amateur botanist named Dwight Ripley. Ripley had been angling for a solo show of his drawings with Betty Parsons, an established 57th Street dealer, and when she said no, he offered to bankroll de Nagy and Myers in what he hoped would be a rival gallery.

Then they had another bit of luck. Ripley was pals with the critic Clement Greenberg and persuaded him to supply Nagy and Myers with a list of new-talent artists to contact.

Hartigan, Rivers, Alfred Leslie and Helen Frankenthaler were some of the names on the list, and were quickly signed up. Willem de Kooning put in a plug for Fairfield Porter, and other connections soon fell into place.

Rivers, for example, introduced Jane Freilicher, a recent convert from abstraction to still life and landscape painting, to the gallery, along with the magnetic O'Hara, who had a menial job at the Museum of Modern Art but was clearly on the ascent. O'Hara, in

