

**Excerpt taken from *ART FROM CAPE COD*
The Cape Cod Museum of Art's Permanent Collections Book
Co-authored by Deborah Forman and Edith Tonelli**

**John Grillo
(1917-2014)**

John Grillo grew up in Connecticut and in the 1930s, while a student at the Hartford School of Fine Arts, he became interested in the work of the Ashcan School and George Luks, Robert Henri, Thomas Hart Benton, and Reginald Marsh. But when he saw a collage by Robert Motherwell, he was inspired to jump into abstraction.

After the Second World War, during which he served in the Navy in the South Pacific, he studied at the San Francisco School of Fine Arts under the G.I. Bill. Mark Rothko was one of his teachers and he was influenced by other Abstract Expressionists, as well as Picasso, Mondrian, and Joan Miró. While in California, he became the leader of the West Coast branch of Abstract Expressionism. In several works of this period, you can see the influence of these artists.

In 1948, Grillo went East and studying with Hans Hofmann confirmed his adulation of intense color. He joined the New York circle of abstractionists. However, in 1967, he moved into figurative work when he began teaching at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. He taught there for twenty-five years until he retired in 1991 and moved to Wellfleet.

Major themes in Grillo's figurative work are found in his *Tango* and *Circus* series, both begun in the 1980s. Exotic and seductive, his dancers capture the heat of the tango. In the Cape Cod Museum of art collection is a six-foot acrylic on wood triptych *Tango Dancers*, which captures a scene, in which a sinister-looking man peeks out from behind a curtain at three voluptuous women with the final panel showing a couple coming together to dance. The exotic image exults in brilliant patterns and the robust rhythms of the tango.

His circus pictures are lively and flatly painted in ebullient colors. *At the Zoo*, also in the museum collection, is a view of five people in front of a cage with an elephant. Mother, father and son appear involved with the elephant, but the other two, a man and woman, are clutching at one another, hardly aware of where they are.

Grillo was infatuated with curvaceous women. His female figures are voluptuous superstars, as are shown in his *Marilyn* series, based on the shapely form of Marilyn Monroe. His nudes and self-portraits recall Matisse's Fauve paintings with their use of expressive color. All his paintings burst with electric colors, which embellish the forms. But when he eliminates color from his drawings and prints, you focus on his line, which is as evocative as his colors. His drawings are ruled by rounded forms. The straight edges that find their way into his compositions become vital complements that enhance his ubiquitous curves.

Grillo ventured back and forth between abstract and figurative works his entire career. Whether his forms are non-objective or representational, the bold colors are always present.

Like many artists, he was an intuitive painter, driven by instincts and feelings. And you can tell by looking at his work—whether they are his free-wheeling abstractions; tight mosaics; or figurative paintings on the themes of the circus, the tango, Marilyn Monroe, or provocative nudes—he knows his priorities: vibrant color, exotic interpretations, and a zestful mood.

Grillo's works are in the collections of major museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Guggenheim Museum, all in New York.