

## Biography of Bumpei Usui



Bumpei Usui was born in Nagano, Japan on February 25, 1898 and died in Greenwich Village, NY on March 1994 at age 96.

The following information is from Virginia Howard, whose great aunt, Frances Elizabeth Pratt, was married to Bumpei Usui. “Bumpei Usui told a story of entering the United States by literally jumping off a ship and swimming to shore, which no

one ever had any reason to believe wasn't true. In the 1940's he owned and operated a frame shop on 13th Street just east of Fifth Avenue.”

Bumpei Usui, like his more famous close friend Yasuo Kuniyoshi, was a Japanese-American framer and artist active during the first half of the 20th century. Usui started making frames and furniture when he arrived in New York City from Japan, opening a frame shop in Greenwich Village at 5 East 14th. street that became popular with Kuniyoshi and other contemporary artists.

During WWII, Usui was saved from incarceration by his many friends who spoke up for him in New York. Had he been living in California at that time, I doubt if his friends could have kept him out of concentration camp. For the duration of the war, his collection of Japanese swords was stored at the homes of his many friends and was returned to him, intact, when the war was over.

Bumpei Usui lived in lower Manhattan, with a large studio workshop in Greenwich Village. Besides his art and frame making, he was an expert connoisseur, collector and teacher of Japanese swords and ceramics, having accumulated a world-class collection of very important Japanese swords. His friend and mentor was Asai Matsujiro (aka Monroe Asai) who also had a fine collection of swords and art. Usui's wife, Frances Elizabeth Pratt, also an artist, was a renowned collector of pre-

Columbian art. Both are buried in the Pratt family lot in Pennsylvania.

Usui was a member of the Japanese sword club of New York and freely shared his knowledge and collection with all interested parties, including those in his native Japan. The remainder of his sword collection (117 items) was sold at Sotheby Parke Bernet on 27 January 1979.

**Bumpei Usui's relationship with Yasuo Kuniyoshi.**



Yasuo Kuniyoshi

The following was written in October 2013 for George by a close friend of Bumpei Usui.

George, the following is what I remember from several conversations with Usui at his residence concerning his relationship with Yasuo Kuniyoshi. Note that Kuniyoshi passed away in 1953, years before I met Usui.

The two of them met in New York City. They were both interested in art, and attended the same art school. After art school Kuniyoshi painted, and painted. Usui painted and drew, He also made a fine living making fine picture frames, and gold lacquer decorating of Steinway pianos.

Usui said that although people liked Kuniyoshi's work, few were sold and that Kuniyoshi was not making enough money to support himself. As they were good friends, Usui gave Kuniyoshi free room and board, plus funds to buy art supplies. Kuniyoshi was very grateful, but had no money to pay back to Usui. Instead of money, he gave Usui his artistic output. Usui subordinated his own painting in order to allow Kuniyoshi a chance to "make it" in the art world. After Kuniyoshi passed away in 1953, Usui found out that Kuniyoshi left all his remaining paintings to him. That is how Usui came into having the largest known single collection of Kuniyoshi's work.

In the 1970s Usui sold the Kuniyoshi paintings to several Tokyo galleries. (Some are in the Smithsonian Institute,)

As an aside to the above information.

Having had the opportunity to view many works by both artists, it is MY opinion that Usui is the better artist. I can fully understand why he suppressed his own talent in order to help his friend.

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### **Biography of Frances Elizabeth Pratt**

Frances Elizabeth Pratt, wife of Bumpei Usui, was born May 25, 1913, in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, the third daughter of Francis Everett Pratt (b. 1871) & Elizabeth Linebaugh Wheeler Pratt (1874-1969).

She studied art at the New York School of Applied Design for Women, going on to the Art Students League and the Hans Hoffman School. She began exhibiting her work in 1941.

She married artist Chris Ritter (1908-1976) in December 1941. That marriage ended in divorce, and she subsequently married Bumpei Usui (1898-1994), a noted Japanese-American painter, after which her name also sometimes appeared as “Frances Pratt Usui” and “Frances Elizabeth Usui.”

She published *Encaustic Materials and Methods*, with co-author Becca Fizell, in 1949. She later published several notable texts in the fields of pre-Columbian art, often in collaboration with Carlo T.E. Gay. She also collected extensively in this area.

She died in New York City on May 2, 2003, a few weeks before her 90th birthday.