

Doris Totten Chase

Doris Totten Chase (29 April 1923 – 13 December 2008^[2]) was an American painter, teacher, and sculptor, but is best remembered for pioneering in the production of key works in the history of video art. She was a member of the Northwest School. In the early days of her career, gender bias was alive and well among the Northwest art establishment, which tended to treat her like a housewife with pretensions. Chase had a substantial career as a painter and sculptor before she set off for New York, where she made groundbreaking videos. Pursuing her art was easier in New York than in the Northwest, where she endured considerable condescension for being female. Her subsequent art, which often championed the cause of women, is some indication of the pain such prejudice caused.

Doris Totten Chase



Born	Doris Mae Totten April 29, 1923 Seattle, Washington ^[1]
Died	December 13, 2008 (aged 85) Seattle, Washington
Nationality	American
Spouse(s)	Elmo Chase (m. 1943–1971)

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Early years

Chase was born Doris Mae Totten, the only daughter of a Seattle attorney. She attended Ravenna Grade School, and graduated from Roosevelt High School in 1941. She studied architecture at the University of Washington and pledged Chi Omega ^[1] (<https://web.archive.org/web/20070718103906/http://groups.northwestern.edu/chiomega/Chi%20Omega%2C%20Xi%20Chapter/Famous%20ChiOs.html>) before dropping out of college in 1943 to marry Elmo Chase, a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy.

She became seriously ill after Gary's birth, suffering what was then termed a "nervous breakdown." The cause of the emotional collapse was clear to her: "I was doing everything except what I wanted to do, which was to paint." Encouraged by a counselor, she began to take time to paint. She studied oil painting briefly with the Russian artist, Jacob Elshin, and with the Greek artist, Nickolas Damascus. She took a class with Northwest artist Mark Tobey.^[2] (<http://www.askart.com/AskART/artists/biography.aspx?artist=108959>) She was very encouraged when, in 1948, one of her paintings was accepted into the Northwest Annual Exhibition.

When son Gary was 3 years old, and Doris was pregnant again, Elmo contracted polio and became almost totally paralyzed. At the same time, they were building a house (Doris Chase was the architect) that was two-thirds finished. To support the family, Chase taught painting and design at Edison Technical School; art collector Virginia Wright was one of her students. Chase was accepted into Women Painters of Washington in 1951. Chase remained a member until the mid-1960s.[3] (<https://web.archive.org/web/20070929074917/http://www.womenpainters.com/ABOUT/About.htm>)

Northwest art

Chase's early paintings were Northwest landscapes and figures, often musicians, in blocks of color. She favored heavy oil surfaces, sometimes building them up with sand to achieve coarse texture. She credits inspiration for her style to the structured designs of Northwest Coast Native American basketry and carving.

“ I didn't have very much schooling in art, so I didn't have people telling me that I couldn't do something this way or that. That freedom from shoulds and should nots kept me going. ”

Northwest painter Kenneth Callahan, in an article for The Seattle Times, reviewed Chase's first solo exhibition in 1956 at the Otto Seligman Gallery, and called Chase "a serious and talented young painter." In 1961, Chase was invited to show at Galleria Numero in Florence, Italy. Subsequent shows were in New York and in Japan, where a writer for Tokyo Shimbun compared her work to Japanese sumi painting. Chase was accepted into the Huntington Hartford Foundation's artists' colony in Pacific Palisades, California, in 1965, 1966, and 1969, each time for a month. From early wash drawings, her work evolved into a series of cement paintings meant for outdoor use, inscribed with faces, and words like "joy" and "love." Chase experimented with painting on shaped canvases when one of her students gave her some pieces of laminated oak. Her first solo New York exhibition, in 1965, at the Smolin Gallery, contained paintings on wood. She exhibited a series of small painted sculptures inset with hinged sections which opened to reveal additional painted section.

Soon the painted pieces and laminated wood shapes became large. She sculpted pieces that weren't fixed in a position, but rather invited viewers to participate in rearranging modules. Many of the forms, such as a black-stained fir piece titled *Haida*, resembled the look of Northwest Coast Native American art. Chase felt the inspiration came from pieces she'd seen at the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition (of 1909) that were on the University of Washington campus when she attended classes there.

“ I was nurtured by them. In the Northwest, you come to feel very close to totems and ritual utensils. When I go away and come back to the Northwest, I feel as if I'm finding old friends. ”

Meanwhile, some of the hoops and circles, arches and ellipses Chase created had grown large enough to be walked through, allowing people to interact with them. While sculpture was still considered a man's work in the 1960s, Chase showed that women could create in this medium as well. An early steel sculpture, the 4.6 m (15 ft) tall *Changing Form*[4] (<https://archive.is/20130123105708/http://www12.flickr.com/photos/nwphotoguy/177452217/in/set-72157594181060491/>), was commissioned for Kerry Park on Queen Anne Hill, becoming one of Seattle's most highly regarded public sculptures.

In 1968, dancer Mary Staton used a set of Chase's giant wooden circles for her choreography. The dancers rocked upside down in enormous wooden arcs, and spread-eagled like spokes inside wooden hoops, wheeled across the stage of the Seattle Opera House. In collaboration with Boeing, Chase produced *Circles*, a computer film based on the spinning hoops. King Screen made a film of the dance and sculpture collaboration. Chase requested and received footage edited out of the King Screen film, and from the cut footage, made her own film, *Circles II*, with the help of film professionals Bob Brown and Frank Olvey. Using color separations that showed the dancers and sculpture as color forms, Chase used time lapse so that trails of light followed the wake of dancers' arms and legs. The film was acclaimed at the 1973 American Film Festival in New York with critic Roger Greenspun comparing it to Matisse's *Dance*

painting. At about the same time *Circles II* was in production, Chase created prototypes of kinetic sculptures for children, made of shaped urethane foam encased in tough, bright-colored fiberglass cloth. The shapes were designed for kids to help them with equilibrium and body awareness.

Midlife career

After 28 years of marriage, Chase filed for divorce, ready to live alone and devote herself to art. She moved to New York in 1972. She rented room 722 at the Chelsea Hotel, which, since 1883 had been a residence for artists, including [Sarah Bernhardt](#), [O. Henry](#), [Janis Joplin](#), [Jasper Johns](#), and [Mark Twain](#). [Dylan Thomas](#) died there, while [Arthur C. Clarke](#) wrote *2001: A Space Odyssey* there. [Arthur Miller](#) and [Virgil Thomson](#) were in residence when Chase arrived.

Impressed with *Circles II*, school administrators at [Columbia University](#) invited Chase to teach a graduate-level course in the film and video department. She declined, not wanting to be tied to anything other than creative work.

Chase began working in video in the early 1970s, using computer imaging, when video art was new. Chase was encouraged by the video artist, [Nam June Paik](#), to explore video art^[3] and during 1973 to 1974, she participated in the [Experimental Television Center's](#) Residency Program.^{[4][5]} Chase began working in video in the early 1970s, using computer imaging, when video art was new. She began by integrating her sculptures with interactive dancers, using special effects to create dreamlike work. [Victor Ancona](#) said of Chase's dance videos, "Watching her tapes gave me the feeling of being transported to an enchanted, phosphorescent environment unceasingly in flux, a voyage I will long remember". The "phosphorescent environment" that so impressed Ancona was the Northwest's iridescent light shown for the first time as art turned video. As a video artist, Chase lectured and showed her work abroad under the auspices of the United States Information Agency, for which she traveled to India, Europe, Australia, South America, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. Working with light as her medium, with dancers turned into flowing colored shapes, Chase brought the [Northwest sensibility](#) to video. Her particular favorite was a pale blue, similar to the color of the sky in a summer sunset. Highly sensual, her work is fluid and stable while exploring movement in the context of abstract architecture. Chase formed a romantic and professional relationship with composer [George Kleinsinger](#), and he composed the music for 12 of her videos.

In the 1980s, Chase used video to explore other concerns such as a divided mind using a split image, multiple superimpositions suggesting compromises, the drift mode suggesting insecurity. In *Glass Curtain* (1983), actress [Jennie Ventriss](#) anguished over her mother's mental and physical deterioration from Alzheimer's disease.

Chase's most widely shown work is a series of 30-minute video dramas regarding older women's autonomy, titled *By Herself. Table for One* (1985), stars [Geraldine Page](#) in a voice-over monologue of a woman uneasy about dining alone, followed by *Dear Papa* (1986), starring [Anne Jackson](#) and her daughter Roberta Wallach. The third video was *A Dancer* (1987). *Still Frame* (1988) featured [Priscilla Pointer](#) and [Robert Symonds](#). *Sophie* (1989) featured [Joan Plowright](#) as a woman who has just left her philandering husband to become "Sophie, reader of French tarot cards". The first two videos were presented at the Berlin and London Film Festivals in 1985 and 1986. *Dear Papa* won First Prize at Paris' 1986 *Women's International Film Festival*.

Later years

Parke Godwin's novel *A Truce with Time* (1988, Bantam Books) is a fictionalized version of Chase's life during her New York years. While he was writing it, Chase made her own film about their relationship, *Still Frame*, produced at the American Film Institute. Art historian [Patricia Failing](#) also wrote a book about Chase, *Doris Chase, Artist in Motion: From Painting and Sculpture to Video Art* (1991, University of Washington Press). In 1989, Chase returned to Seattle, dividing her time between the East and West Coasts, working on video in New York and sculpture in Seattle. She began works in glass, sometimes combining it with steel.

“ Working with glass I feel as if I've returned to painting in a new medium. ”

In 1993, Chase produced a video documentary about her home, the Chelsea Hotel. The Chelsea Hotel was originally conceived as New York's first major cooperative apartment house, owned by a consortium of wealthy families in 1883, becoming a hotel in 1905. Chase's video paid tribute to the building's 110th anniversary, and those who have called it home.[5] (http://www.historylink.org/essays/output.cfm?file_id=5330) In 1999, her four-piece bronze sculpture *Moon Gates*, 17 feet high, was installed at Seattle Center. New York's MoMA acquired her complete video and film works. The Seattle Art Museum has only one Chase work in its collection: a 1950s oil painting. Chase's work won honors and awards at 21 film and video festivals. Her work has a permanent place in the archives of New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). It is collected by major museums and art centers in several countries.

Filmography

Director

- *Glass Curtain* (1990) (V)
- *Sophie* (1990)
- *A Dancer* (1988) (TV)
- *Still Frame* (1988)
- *Dear Papa* (1986)

Writer

- *Glass Curtain* (1990) (V)
- *Sophie* (1990)
- *Still Frame* (1988)
- *Dear Papa* (1986)

Cinematographer

- *Glass Curtain* (1990)
- *Sophie* (1990)
- *Still Frame* (1988)
- *Dear Papa* (1986)[6] (<https://comment.imdb.com/name/nm1597565/>)

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4. "Chronological History of the Center: 1969-present" (<http://www.experimentaltvcenter.org/chronological-history-center-1969-present>). Experimental Television Center, LTD. Retrieved 8 July 2015.
5. Doris Chase's artworks can be found in the Experimental Television Center Archive (<http://hdl.handle.net/1813.001/8946249>), in the Rose Goldsen Archive of New Media Art, Cornell University Library

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- Smithsonian American Art Museum, *Study for Sculpture* (<http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/results/index.cfm?jsessionid=DD77C20E0E238B5A08F1DF663B9F4360.cfusion3?q=Doris+Chase&page=1&start=0&gsearch=0&chsearch=1>)^[*permanent dead link*]
- *Video works by Doris Chase* (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCVDJG4NMegffbpFaW3b1TPA>)

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