

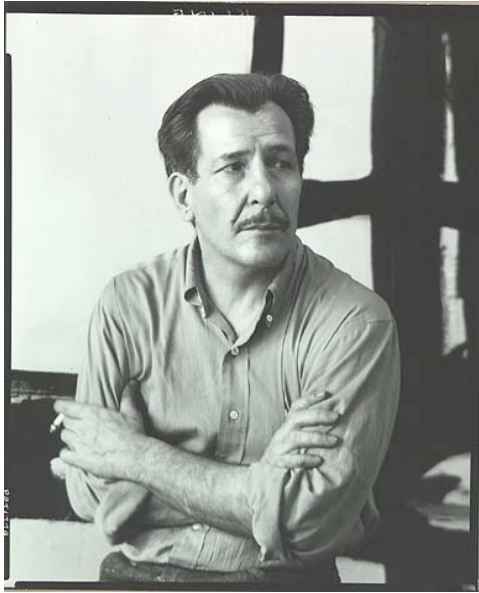
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Franz Jozef Kline

(American Painter, 1910-1962)



Kline's first academic training was at Boston University from 1931 to 1935 and in London at the Heatherley School of Art from 1937 to 1938 as an illustrator and draughtsman. Two main tendencies emerged at an early stage that would later develop into a powerful contribution to the 'gestural' trend within Abstract Expressionism.

Numerous small graphics, sketches and oils and the mural series *Hot Jazz* (Norfolk, VA, Chrysler Mus.), painted for a New York bar in 1940, reveal an interest in translating animated subjects into quick, rudimentary strokes. Kline admired and found inspiration in a wide range of artists notable for their fluency in handling paint, including Rembrandt, Goya, Manet, Sargent and Whistler.

By contrast, an inclination to compose in terms of simplified areas was derived from academic training and perhaps also reflected Kline's memories of his native Pennsylvania's coal-mining region, with its stark scenery, locomotives and similar massive mechanical shapes to which the titles of his later abstract images sometimes referred. *Nijinsky as Petrouchka* and similar canvases marked the climax of this representational phase with their combination of vigorous brushwork and an angular substructure. But against the context of contemporary New York painting a move towards abstraction was inevitable.

In 1946 Kline began to generalize his subjects into series of lines and planes, which produced the semi-abstract mosaic of broad facets influenced by Cubism found in *The Dancer*. During the next three years a very dynamic and fluid handling emerged, revealing the impact of Bradley Walker Tomlin, Gorky and especially the black-and-white abstractions of de Kooning. From these artists Kline evidently saw that his oil medium was capable of a calligraphic freedom and that the vestiges of figures and objects could become those rapid marks, halfway between ciphers and pure brushstrokes, that collide together in the shallow space of *Untitled*. Studies in ink on paper simultaneously reinforced Kline's sense of black and white as terse equivalents and allowed him to develop small emblematic compositions, usually based on a flurry of interlocking curves and

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grid-like vectors. When de Kooning enlarged some of these drawings c. 1948 as part of his own work using a Bell-Opticon projector, it affirmed Kline's growing awareness that the sketch could be expanded to dramatic effect. In this process the rawness, spontaneity and crude design associated with a small-scale sketch assumed a monumental *frisson* once the dimensions of *Cardinal* were reached. This and comparable canvases comprised a one-man show at the Charles Egan Gallery in New York in October and November 1950, which established the artist as an innovator, partly on account of the sheer austerity of a style that did not change significantly again until the end of the decade.

The works in the Egan show of 1950 therefore demonstrated an idiom, which could be continually explored and regenerated. In *Cardinal* and its successors great bands and wedges of black paint form a rough grid, sometimes varied by the inclusion of loops or arcs, which appear to defy the actual canvas limits, thrusting inexorably beyond its confines. Kline characterized this provocative instability as 'the awkwardness of "not-balance", the tentative reality of lack of balance ...', although in fact such images were composed with some care; the many sketches done on telephone directory pages chart a search for configurations that unite the impromptu and the monolithic. The exceptional economy of certain compositions, such as the rectangular motif in *Wotan*, prompted frequent speculation about the influence of oriental calligraphy, yet Kline denied such links. Instead he acknowledged that his vocabulary was sufficiently elemental to evoke the known or the recognizable while avoiding any literal references:

'There are forms that are figurative to me.... I don't have the feeling that something has to be completely non-associative as far as figure form is concerned.' The allusions can perhaps be read as harsh rectilinear silhouettes of New York itself, as well as the mechanical presences of the artist's youth in Pennsylvania. Moreover, even the handling of black and white can be interpreted as emotive, since the enamel paints create textural conflicts that reiterate the struggle of forces on the picture's surface. Kline fostered intense tonal contrasts, often working at night under strong light, and his use of housepainter's brushes strengthened this aura of immediacy; tiny splatters or inflections accompanying the black wedges enhanced their explosive velocity. In the later 1950s such paintings as *Requiem* added a third type of work to his repertory, by allowing the previously clear cut monochrome divisions to merge into a more complex chiaroscuro, the emotional tone of which Kline may have had in mind when he mentioned in an interview in 1960 the 'brooding quality' of certain 'impending forms'.

In common with several other Abstract Expressionists, such as de Kooning and Rothko, Kline sought in the later 1950s to maintain a stylistic development. One result was a sequence of exceptionally large works, executed from 1959 to 1961 and known as the 'wall paintings', that echo the monumentality of later paintings by Clyfford Still or Robert Motherwell, with their almost panoramic horizontal sweep. Another decision, to introduce a full range of color, proved more significant. Some black-and-white paintings had already retained traces of somber hues, but now Kline returned to the strident palette that he had largely eschewed since the later 1940s, as in the clashing green, red, and purples of *King Oliver*. At best, these accents amplify a frenetic verve in

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this final period. However, the color planes occasionally seem rather superfluous, and at the time of his death the direction of Kline's art was unresolved. Nonetheless, his influence on the second generation of gestural painters was substantial, and his works comprise some of the most imposing achievements of Abstract Expressionism.

His work was included in the groundbreaking exhibition *The New American Painting* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (1958, traveled to Basel, Milan, Madrid, Berlin, Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris, and London). Major solo exhibitions have been held at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1968), the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. (1979), Cincinnati Art Museum (1985), the Menil Collection, Houston (1994), Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona (1994), and Castello di Rivoli, Turin (2004).

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