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A Note on Franz Kline

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In writing about Franz Kline, I feel like an aviator circling a "Kline" airfield, searching for the open runway that will allow access to the enigma that is Kline.

Was he an architect, a calligrapher, a mystic, a Zen master, or merely a superb, disciplined draftsman who learned to give vent to his frustrations when he fell in with a hard drinking group of painters (like de Kooning and Pollock)?

There is no clear answer to these questions, possibly because Kline was the most underexposed and under-appreciated of the major painters in the United States. There are several explanations for this. His work was difficult: black and white were not as appealing as color to the American market. It was also tough to promote in the public forum, especially since many choice paintings were sold while Kline lay dying in a hospital, thereby depleting his estate. What dealer had the resources or the inclination to risk large sums of money on a smallish body of work with little promise of return? Thus Kline never had sufficient public exposure to gather crowds of supporters. His strongest backing came from other painters and a small but avid group of collectors and dealers who could deal with the toughness of his work.

This exhibition traces Kline's evolution from the early illustrations of the late 1930s and early 1940s to full-blown maturity in works like *Slate Cross*, 1961 (p. 293). It seems fitting that this important retrospective should take place in Italy, since some of Kline's earliest exhibitions were held here.

Kline's first dealer, Charles Egan, maintained that much of Kline's abstraction was derived from reductions of tables and chairs. His early work is replete with studies of such furniture (see *Studio Interior*, 1943, p. 157; *Rocking Chair [Elizabeth]*, 1948, p. 177) and paintings of obscured chairs. But the most amazing and inexplicable aspect of Kline's work is his jump from the biomorphic abstractions of the late 1940s strongly influenced by de Kooning, to his 1950 breakthrough abstraction, which seemed to appear spontaneously (*Untitled*, 1950, p. 191; *Untitled*, 1951, p. 205; *Painting [Horizontal II]*, 1952, pp. 208-209).

Did Kline undergo the same explosive frustration with painting that Pollock had been experiencing when he produced his drip painting in 1947? In both artists' work there was no clue in the earlier paintings to hint at what was to follow. Kline was influenced by de Kooning in the later 1940s abstractions, as illustrated by *'47 Series No. 4*, 1947 (p. 171) or *Untitled*, 1948 (p. 181). Ironically, in the mid-to-late 1950s, de Kooning's landscapes were heavily influenced by Kline's works. However, neither Kline's 1950 work, nor Pollock's 1947 drip paintings seem to have any parentage in their own earlier painting. Rather, these startling departures do indeed appear to have been

engendered by frustration with the development of their work, and the inhibiting qualities of the traditional techniques they were employing. De Kooning's abstraction, on the other hand, demonstrates a slow, methodical trajectory that, when confronted with a wall, finding nowhere to go, consistently returns to the female figure and from there pushes out to abstraction.

Since Kline and de Kooning were such close friends, it seems natural to discuss the one with the other. Both men's works have a heroic aspect that was belied by their physical presence. When I first met them, I was shocked by their relatively small stature - 5 feet 6 inches- in comparison to the gigantic scale and impact of their work.

In the end, it is the exhibition itself that will shed light on these works, telling us more about Kline than I can express in writing.