



CASTELLO DI RIVOLI

FRANZ KLINE 1910-1962

OCTOBER 20, 2004

JANUARY 30, 2005

REGIONE PIEMONTE

FONDAZIONE CRT

CAMERA DI COMMERCIO INDUSTRIA
ARTIGIANATO E AGRICOLTURA DI TORINO

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Castello di Rivoli • Museum of Contemporary Art

FRANZ KLINE 1910–1962

Franz Kline (1910–1962) was one of the most important painters of the Twentieth century, significantly contributing to what became known internationally in the postwar period as Abstract Expressionism or Action Painting. Perhaps one of the last great artistic movements of modernism, the Abstract Expressionists coalesced in New York in the 1940s and 1950s. As did their European counterparts participating in movements such as CoBrA, Art Brut and Informel, Kline and his fellow Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko focused in their art on the actuality of experience, giving image to that which occurs in the subjective psyche, considering experience itself as an aesthetic act. Around 1950, when a new postwar consumer society was beginning to evolve, Kline radically simplified painting, reached for deeper forms of communication than those developing in popular culture, and created pictorial statements in black and white that were experiments in the relations between phenomenological perceptions of our bodies in space and our emotional responses to those perceptions. Like many modernist artists and avant-garde writers, he pronounced his great “No”

– to positivism, to rationalism, to bourgeois life and its conformities. As Kline himself summarized: “Instead of making a sign you can read, you make a sign you *can’t* read.” His art both suggests and denies significance and meaning. Kline created two-dimensional works of great emotional impact. Their architectural and dynamic spatial organization provided enormous possibilities to subsequent generations from the post-minimalists to the Arte Povera artists who would explore similar aesthetic experiences through three-dimensional structures in real space from the 1960s onwards. This exhibition brings together almost one hundred works by Kline, including a selection of major large paintings and a number of studies for those paintings. Forty years after the Kline memorial exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, was presented in Turin in 1963, this is the first European exhibition to fully explore both Kline’s early somber works of a realist nature as well as his major achievements in abstraction, both in black and white and in color. From Kline’s small oil painting *Locomotive* of 1942 to his large, sweeping black and white *Painting (Horizontal II)* of 1952; from his

transitional abstraction *'47 Series no. 4* of 1947 to the complex and highly dramatic *Siegfried*, 1958, where grays “spatialize” the field of black and white marks; from the colorful *King Oliver* of 1958 to the somber late works of 1961 including *Black Iris* and *Slate Cross*, up to one of his last works, *Red Painting*, 1961, this exhibition reaffirms and articulates the importance of Kline’s work and its topicality today.

Associated with the New York School of painting in the 1950s, Kline was not originally a New Yorker. Born in the coal-mining areas of Western Pennsylvania, his father died when he was a boy and he spent part of his childhood in boarding school. As a teenager, he was good at sports and drawing, particularly interested in caricature. He traveled to England to study art in the late 1930s and acquired a solid and direct knowledge of European masters from Rembrandt to Manet. He returned to The United States and settled with his first wife Elizabeth Vincent Parsons in New York in 1938, doing odd jobs and making commissioned murals and portraits, as well as bar sketches in exchange for beers. Some of his earliest drawings indicate a careful observation of Italian

Renaissance draftsmanship, and some paintings explore the light of interiors in the mode of Vermeer. As can be seen from these early works, Kline’s approach did not develop out of the formalist abstraction of early twentieth-century avant-garde art. Quite to the contrary, it came from realism – an impulse to celebrate life in all its manifestations and to understand the human condition at one of the darkest moments of Western history. In the 1940s, he began to spend time regularly at the Cedar Bar where the artistic community met and he became a close friend of fellow artist de Kooning. A unique series of sketches, moving from the figurative to the abstract, are brought together for this exhibition. These drawings of a solitary and melancholy figure in a rocking chair, or sitting alone at a table, her head tilted downwards, are portraits of Elizabeth. They are amongst Kline’s most poignant early works and eventually evolved into his first fully abstract paintings. These rocking chair figures suggest the interest both in structure and movement, organization and dynamic dis-organization that would become characteristic of his abstract paintings. They are an existentialist metaphor for the condition of modern life: the futility of its dynamism, its constant movement

yet stillness and absence of progress from one point to another. These small paintings indicate an awareness of, and interest in, the representation of pain, especially psychological pain.

Around 1947, without much exploring early twentieth-century European Abstraction or Surrealism, nor post-Cubist developments and continuations of abstraction in the 1920s and 1930s, Kline shifted from realism to web-like curvilinear abstract and gestural “all-over” compositions, which suggest the general climate of Abstract Expressionism. After a few years of these “transitional” works, in 1949–50 he developed to his signature style – large, iconic and minimal black and white squares, rectangles and interlocking stripes painted in broad brush strokes with oil-based enamel house paint. Although Kline presented his innovative art later than de Kooning or Pollock, on the occasion of his first solo show at the Charles Egan Gallery in New York in 1950, his reputation grew rapidly and steadily over the following years. He was amongst the founders of the Artists Club in 1949 and an initiator and organizer of the renowned *Ninth Street Show* (1951).

By 1955, when his work was included in a group show at the Whitney Museum, he was acclaimed as one of the most important artists of Abstract Expressionism.

In the mid-1950s Kline reintroduced color into his black and white palette, initially in accents and embedded beneath black, then using increasingly broad segments. Sidney Janis became his principal gallery and organized four solo shows with the artist from 1956 to 1961, as well as a memorial exhibition in 1963. But Kline also exhibited in Europe, and in particular in Italy. His first solo exhibition in Europe was at the Galleria La Tartaruga in Rome in early 1958, followed by the Galleria del Naviglio in Milan in spring. He participated in the Venice Biennale in 1956 and again in 1960, when he won a special jury prize and traveled to Italy. In the decade preceding his premature death just before his fifty-second birthday in 1962, his work was included in important group exhibitions such as *The New Decade: 35 American Painters and Sculptors* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (1955), *12 Americans* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1956), and the traveling exhibition *The New*

American Painting (1958), organized by the International Program of the Museum of Modern Art, and touring to Basel, Milan, Madrid, Berlin, Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris, and London. He also exhibited in every edition of the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh from 1952 to 1961.

Kline is associated with the gestural art of Action Painting and his works appear to trace moments of intense, and immediate emotion. The constructed nature of his paintings, however, where white has been painted over black and vice versa, where the compositions carefully enlarge small ink washes on sheets of paper torn out of telephone books – belies this simple categorization. Kline – more than others Action Painters – explored the phenomenology of emotion as something intimate. His large paintings affect our sense of proximity, and thus of urgency; they provide a feeling of the “close-up” and thus of the unavoidable “here and now” through their sense of disorganized organization, of unbalanced balance and in general of a dynamic structure.

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

The exhibition has been made possible thanks to

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HOURS

Tuesday - Thursday: 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.
Friday - Sunday: 10 a.m. - 9 p.m.
Closed Monday, December 25 and January 1st.

Free guided tours to the exhibition take place on Saturday at 3:30 p.m. and 6 p.m.; Sunday and holidays at 11 a.m., 3 p.m. and 6 p.m.
Tours covering the history and architecture of the Castello di Rivoli are held on Sunday at 4:30 p.m.
On Saturday, Sunday and holidays a shuttle bus service is available leaving from Piazza Castello, Turin.

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