

# FRANZ KLINE: OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND

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**Up close, with maximum impact:  
a new view of Franz Kline thirty years after his death.**

**F**ranz Kline died in 1962, and Abstract Expressionism as a movement died with him. Kline, de Kooning, and Pollock were the three major figures of the movement as it was generally understood in the Fifties, but as the viewpoint swiveled into retrospection, Kline's position began to suffer a process of erosion that has continued to this day. Pollock, who had been the big star before his death in 1956, continued to keep his exalted place in the pantheon of painter-heroes; de Kooning, after Kline's death, became the only remaining "star" of the movement. Numerous New York museum and gallery exhibitions of both men's work were held during the Sixties and Seventies while Kline had only four between 1962 and 1984, and of them, only one in a museum. No wonder people were asking so often in those years why there was no major book on him, why no full-scale retrospective? Now there are both in the combined form of *The Vital Gesture: Franz Kline in Retrospect*, an exhibition completing its national tour at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts this summer, and a book by Harry Gaugh. The question then becomes, is this the book, is this the retrospective Kline deserves? Do they restore him to his rightful place in the pantheon beside his friends?

First let's examine how he lost that place. The paucity of Kline exhibitions in New York is certainly one cause. Nowhere is it more true that out of sight is out of mind than in the art world. The reasons behind this situation, however, are many. Though Kline enjoyed a good press, he had no powerful East Coast critic specifically championing his work during the twelve years of his career between his first phenomenal black and white exhibition in 1950 and his death. Pollock had all the big guns behind him, Clement Greenberg being the biggest gun in the west then, and de Kooning had Tom Hess and Harold Rosenberg, both packing heavy-duty weapons. These three critics were not only the most respected at the time, they also had complete access to the art audience.

Critics supportive of Kline such as Dore Ashton, Eugene Goossen, and Robert Goldwater had nothing like the same amount of clout. Thus, in the years after Kline's death there were no writers of power promoting books or exhibitions for him and emerging writers had little to turn to among past criticism to interest them in Kline. Then too, when Kline died there were only a few major paintings left in his estate, the bulk of which consisted of works on paper and early work—in sum, not the makings of a financial vested interest. Compare his situation with that of Morris Louis, for instance, little known in life, but whose posthumous reputation was enormous in direct proportion to the huge number of major works left at his death and the enthusiastic critical support they were given.

Kline had become identified with the Cedar Bar, macho male, swashbuckling brand of Abstract Expressionism, but during the Sixties and Seventies that kind of thing wasn't in favor. Instead the cooler, more intellectual, more quietly passionate forms of Abstract Expressionism were interesting to the new Pop-Op-Minimal generation. Barnett Newman was rediscovered and pulled from the semi-obscurity into which he had retreated after his 1950 and 1951 exhibition disasters. He became the darling of the Greenberg circle formalists; then both Tom Hess and Harold Rosenberg brought their heavy guns into Newman's service as well. Mark Rothko became increasingly popular, and increasingly depressed, it seems. Ad Reinhardt, always the one jeering at successful Abstract Expressionists from the sidelines, became the beloved guru for a host of Minimal and Conceptual acolytes. Kline's special brilliance as a conversationalist was naturally lost as memories faded, tapes were lost, and his stories told and retold. You had to have been there to understand his elliptical use of baseball metaphors and Borscht Belt routines to discuss art. The story chains he wrought were

like riffs in jazz, some going on sometimes for hours, each sparked by associations with the last, but ending up proving the point that had gotten him started in the first place. Fascinating, but not the stuff of serious monographs.

Then a new generation of art historian/critics came along in the Seventies; naturally, since they were looking for fresh lodes to mine, they realized that Kline's early work was still unexamined. Assuming a direct (though perhaps overstated) relevance for the mature work, they plunged in, seeing "the early work as signals," as the title of one exhibition catalogue phrased it.<sup>1</sup> Harry Gaugh wrote his doctoral dissertation on Kline's work up to 1950, making sporadic connections with the mature paintings when he found compositional resemblances to the early work. He went on to write two magazine articles, one on the transitional pre-1950 paintings<sup>2</sup> and a more general piece on the "romantic" mature abstractions.<sup>3</sup> Gaugh's other contribution—an important one—to Kline reappraisal was his organization of the exhibition *Franz Kline, the Color Abstractions* for the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. in 1979.

Add up all of Gaugh's work on Kline, subtracting much of what little formal analysis there was, and you have *The Vital Gesture: Franz Kline*, the book. Valuable though the work undoubtedly is, it leaves much to be said. Gaugh's forte is his carefully researched biographical data which he sprinkles liberally throughout the book, substituting both colorful adjectives and details about Kline's work habits for analysis of the paintings themselves. A telling example can be found in his handling of Kline's first one-man show at the Egan Gallery in 1950, the crucial, pivotal exhibition that put him on the map. A great deal of attention should have been paid to this show, its background, its aftermath, and each of the paintings in it. No other exhibition of Kline's, or of any of the other Abstract Expressionists for that matter, with the possible exception of Pollock's first one-man exhibition at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century in 1943, was as significant. Instead of discussing the paintings in depth Gaugh writes:

The paintings displayed a variety of images and moods: the geometric austerity of *Wotan*, the tentative weblike balance of *Giselle*, the taut sharpness of *Cardinal*. In spite of this range the canvases shared one feature that they proclaimed openly, if not in all cases loudly; they were black and white. Other details might slip away from the viewer's memory but not the indelible afterimage that these were made of black and white paint.<sup>4</sup>

Deeming further analysis unnecessary, the author proceeds to give us masses of factual, biographical, and anecdotal material concerning Kline's and others' feelings about his being a black and white painter; a detailed description of his current studio and his work habits; a lengthy discussion of how the paintings were named; and roughly how often Kline used circles, triangles, and squares in his work. All the information is enlightening and helps makes Kline accessible to a larger audience. Gaugh humanizes the hero, makes him likeable. He doesn't, however, address the central issue: what made Kline a great artist. Only thorough and penetrating analysis of the work itself can accomplish that. Critical judgments as to relative quality require the ability to make formal dissections of how paintings work, how they convey meaning, and how they relate to other paintings being done at the time by the artist and by other peer artists.

Gaugh has ferreted out and identified the probable sources for the majority of Kline's titles—fascinating material. But even though he tells us that Kline's titles were applied to the paintings after the fact by committee, and half by chance at the time of their installation in the gallery rather than in the studio, he feels no compunctions about using them to read images into these abstractions and to imply iconographic significance in their use. For example, after mentioning that *Nijinsky* was an homage to the great dancer Kline revered, which is true, he writes:

*Giselle* also grew out of his familiarity with ballet. Moreover, Sadler's Wells Ballet, on its first U.S. visit, performed *Giselle* with Margot Fonteyn and Moira Shearer alternating in the title role at the Metropolitan Opera House, two weeks or so before it opened. A form in the painting suggests the moss-covered cross traditionally on stage during *Giselle's* second act. A similar association of title and image is possible with *Leda*, in light of the bird- or winglike form at the bottom.<sup>5</sup>

Is the moss-covered cross the source for the many crosses that appear



Franz Kline, *Scudera*, 1961. Oil on canvas, 110½ x 78". Private Collection.

Franz Kline, *Andrus*, 1961. Oil on canvas, 79 x 132". Private Collection. ▶

in Kline's paintings? Did Kline actually go to see the ballet? His ballet-dancer wife was hospitalized at the time. Would he have been likely to have gone alone? In any case, we know the painting was named long after being painted, and not necessarily by him. Kline used to jot down names he thought he might like to use someday on scraps of paper and keep them in his pocket until there was a painting-naming session

before an exhibition. Of course, the rule at these sessions was that one veto by anyone present meant the name couldn't be used, even if it was the artist's own suggestion, as Gaugh himself points out.

It is difficult for contemporary art historian/critics, distanced as they are by their training from actual artistic practice, to understand what a long, hard-fought battle it was for the Abstract Expressionists to



drag themselves away from representation, and how, for many of them, representation was like quicksand, ever able to pull them back into it again. De Kooning is always moving back and forth between the two modes; Pollock was drawn back in again after the “high” abstraction of the drip painting years when, in 1951, he began to use the drip technique to create faces and figures.

Kline, on the other hand, who took the longest of all to escape from the clutches of tradition, was absolutely resolute in his commitment to abstraction once he made the shift. He definitely did not intend the viewer to see figures in his paintings even when they were titled with a person’s name. The titles were homages to sources of inspiration—Merce Cunningham (*Merce C*) and *Nijinsky*, dancers; *King Oliver* and *Hampton*, jazz musicians; *Wotan* and *Sigfried*, Wagnerian characters—in much the same way as Dan Flavin’s totally non-objective fluorescent tube sculptures, such as *Diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Robert Rosenblum)*, and with as total a lack of intended visual correlation.

Extensive research still needs to be done on the sources of inspiration for these early breakthrough paintings, as well as for all of his key mature work. An artist who knew Kline well in the Fifties, Budd Hopkins, brought out Kline’s “baroque constructivist” tendencies in a 1979 article for *Artforum*,<sup>6</sup> but instead of exploring this potentially rich vein, Gaugh is content to mention that one critic called Kline’s 1950 paintings “melted Mondrians,” and to cite Mondrian along with Josef Albers, Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, and Adolph Gottlieb as sources for Kline’s use of the square and open rectangle. Kline bought a small Albers *Homage to the Square*, and he can be considered an influence, as can Mondrian, but other sources are far more probable than Klee, Picasso, or Gottlieb, among them de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, and of course Malevich. The Russian’s spiritualized Constructivism (Suprematism) with its dynamism, its squares leaning this way and that or soaring up and out into infinite space, is much closer to Kline than even Mondrian’s is. Kline told Frank O’Hara:

Malevich is interesting to me. Maybe because you are able to translate through his motion the endless wonder of what a painting could be, without describing an eye or a breast. That would be looking at things romantically, which painters don’t do. The thing has its own appeal outside of this white-on-white, this-on-that idea.<sup>7</sup>

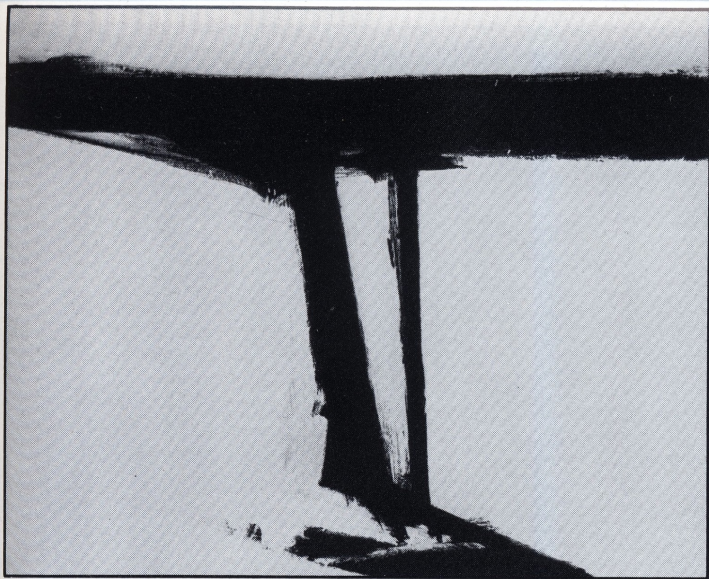
If one wanted to delve into more cloudy realms, the relation of Kline’s transitional (1947-49) abstractions to his friend David Smith’s drawings

might be productive, but selecting a blobby-cornered, soft little square out of a compartment in an Adolph Gottlieb Pictograph as a clue to Kline’s use of the floating square is silly. Citing Klee and Picasso as Kline sources is also a bit odd when you consider that Kline, alone among the Abstract Expressionists, doesn’t seem to have paid particular attention to French Modernism—Picassoid, Surrealist, or whatever kind. Americans like Homer, Eakins, Ryder, and the members of the Ash Can School were strong early influences, as was James McNeill Whistler whom he deeply admired from his vantage point as an American, an Anglophile, a painter, and an illustrator. Certain academics like Jonas Lie, Edwin Austin Abbey, and Joseph Pennell, and Impressionists like William Merritt Chase and Charles Hawthorne were also likely to be of interest to Kline.

It’s difficult to imagine any other Abstract Expressionist paying a visit to John Sloan as Kline did—Léger, Miró, but not Sloan. Sloan’s well-known *The Wake of the Ferry II* is a clear prototype for Kline’s frequent use of a tilted square off center in a composition. Compare it with *Zinc Door* (1961); *Painting No. 7* (1952), a very Mondrian-like image; and *Le Gros* (1961). The comparison is equally apt for *White Forms* (1952), *Four Square* (1956), and *Black and White No. 2* (1960) if they are all turned vertically. *Le Gros* also owes an obvious debt to Whistler’s *Nocturne in Blue and Gold: Old Battersea Bridge*, which is in the collection of the Tate Gallery in London where Kline attended art school.

A number of Whistler’s paintings are so abstractly composed that they easily find echoes in Kline’s work, among them *An Orange Note*, *Sweetshop*, with its prominent square and rectangle; *Nocturne in Blue and Gold: Valparaiso*, with its upthrust foreground diagonal plane; *Rotherhithe*, an etching from the Thames set which is a likely source for the Sloan as well; *The Kitchen*, an etching from the French set, and various views of Battersea Reach and Bridge. Finally Joseph Stella’s famous paintings of the Brooklyn Bridge which turn it into a surface-filling icon of power can be considered partial sources for *Harley Red* (1959-60), *Red Painting* (1961), *Shaft and Bridge* of 1955, and *Meryon* (1961). The energetic swiftness and dynamism of Kline’s impulsive-looking brushwork, however, undoubtedly goes back to his study of illustration, particularly that of Phil May and Charles Keene, where everything is always in motion.

Kline seems to skip directly from the American and English art and illustration he studied in art school, and the old masters he revered



Franz Kline, *Le Gros*, 1961. Oil on canvas, 41 1/8 x 52 5/8". Museum of Modern Art, Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection. Courtesy Cincinnati Art Museum.



Franz Kline, *Black and White*, 1951. Oil on canvas, 44 x 34". Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery.

Now Kline asks, "Are all the stripes the same color?" "No." "The same width?" "Do some of the pictures have more than one stripe? Are the stripes lighter or darker than the backgrounds, on top of them or behind?" After a few confused attempts by the collector to answer these questions Franz stops him saying, "I don't know, it's all getting too damned complicated for me."

The story is indicative not only of Kline's willingness to come to the defense of a fellow artist, even one whose work he wasn't particularly close to, when he was attacked by a Philistine, but also of his commitment to abstraction, very severe, even minimal abstraction.

Kline's brusque masculine facture separated his paintings from those of these "uptown" intellectuals and allied him with the "downtown" Action Painters. His work felt physical, no matter how spiritual its content might be, probably because it was grounded in a sense of the body in action. Kline's own youthful experiences as a star high school athlete—lightning responses at shortstop, sudden directional changes, stunning trajectories out from the tackling hordes to make the touchdown—coupled with his familiarity with the dance, due to his wife's involvement, seem to find expression in the spare 1950 canvases, and in much of his later work. *Wotan* (1950), with its rough-edged open square soaring through the top of the canvas, reminds one of how geometrical the configurations a leaping dancer makes with his or her limbs can be. Its anti-gravitational pull is felt in many of Kline's finest paintings up to the very end of his life when the black square in *Scudera* ascends heavenward into the deep blue.

Circles are frequent in this first exhibition, but they fade out of his form world afterward. *Turin* (1960) and *Accent Grave* (1955) are among the few later paintings incorporating even parts of a circle, and *Figure Eight*, commonly dated 1952, seems more characteristic of the 1950-51 work. The gestures that made *Cardinal*, *Clockface*, and *Figure Eight* are elbow-to-wrist gestures, a major step up the scale from his former concentration on smaller wrist movements of the brush, but only an intervening step before the full arm gestures of *Wotan* and the post-1951 canvases which carry out its implications. Wider brushes went along with the more expansive gestures, and both lend themselves more comfortably to straight lines. Relatively more secure in his system of working from studies by 1952, his surfaces are also usually less thickly overworked, cleaner, and fresher.

Unfortunately, Gaugh reproduces only five of the eleven images in the crucial 1950 exhibition, some of them the studies. The author seems to have a preference for the studies over the finished paintings, perhaps because of their fresh, messy spontaneity, but this bias has resulted in a book that is somewhat out of balance. Despite the fact that Kline consistently worked on a large scale during his mature years, only twenty-four large-size works are reproduced full-page while fifteen additional full-page illustrations are given over to works of very modest dimensions. Moreover, many of the artist's finest and best known canvases are not reproduced. *Cardinal*, *Dahlia*, *Shenandoah Wall*, *Sabro IV*, *King Oliver*, the Philadelphia Museum of Art's *Torches Mauve*, the Chicago Art Institute's *Horizontal II*, and the Museum of Modern Art's *Chief* are among the more than two dozen very important mature paintings that were neither reproduced nor included in the exhibition—a very sizeable proportion of his 1950-1962 work. Some of the blame for this unfortunate situation can be laid on the book's double function as a museum catalogue, but the problems of logistics and reluctant lenders ought not to have been given precedence over the book's ostensible role as a definitive monograph.

For those fortunate enough to view the exhibition as it was installed by Curator Denny Young in the Cincinnati Art Museum, a whole new image of Kline emerges which goes a long way toward making up the distance between the actual and the ideal in the text and the selection. Young did two radical things with the exhibition design which ought to be a model for all future installations of Kline's work: she had all the spaces built small enough to approximate the size of Kline's studio—giving *Scudera*, his last great painting, a room to itself, and never placing very many paintings in a given space even when they were small; and she had the walls painted colors ranging from warm beige in the opening rooms, through pale grays and blue grays, to deeper and deeper blues that almost verged on darkness in the last parts of the exhibition. While in a couple of places the rooms seemed a little too dark, this decision gave the viewer an unprecedented opportunity to see the whites in Kline's paintings as true equals of the blacks. Whether on the white page of a book or the standard white walls of a museum or gallery, Kline's black and white work, a large percentage of his oeuvre, looked inevitably as though he made black marks on white grounds, occasioning the inevitable comparison with Oriental calligraphy which set his teeth on edge. Painting in relatively modest spaces, usually at night with strong lights on the canvas, and being "in" his painting, absorbed in the give and take of the action, Kline didn't read his paintings that way, and was angry when others did.

Curator Young make it possible for us to see Kline's paintings more the way he saw them, and to experience them up close, with maximum impact, as he intended them to be experienced. In one bold stroke she gave Kline new life. One wonders whether he mightn't have been able to sustain his high place in the pantheon of Abstract-Expressionist heroes if his 1968 retrospective at the Whitney Museum had been so thoughtfully installed.

1. Albert Boime and Fred Mitchell, *Franz Kline: The Early Works as Signals*, exhibition catalogue (Binghamton and Purchase: State University of New York, 1977).
2. Harry Gaugh, "Kline's Transitional Abstractions, 1946-1950," *Art in America*, 64 (July-August 1974), pp. 43-47.
3. Harry Gaugh, "Franz Kline's Romantic Abstractions," *Artforum*, 13 (Summer 1975), pp. 28-37.
4. Harry Gaugh, *The Vital Gesture: Franz Kline* (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Art Museum; New York: Abbeville Press, 1985), p. 87.
5. Gaugh, *The Vital Gesture*, p. 95.
6. Budd Hopkins, "Franz Kline's Color Abstractions: Remembering and Looking Afresh," *Artforum* (Summer 1979), pp. 37-41.
7. Frank O'Hara, "Franz Kline Talking," *Frank Kline, A Retrospective Exhibition* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1964), p. 12.