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April 2005

Review of Franz Kline 1910-1962

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Recommended Citation

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Black-and-White

FRANZ KLINE, 1910-1962 / Edited by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev.—Milan, Italy: Skira Editore, dist. by Rizzoli International Publications, December 2004.—424 p.: ill.—ISBN 88-7624-141-8: \$50.00.



The Castello di Rivoli, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea has devoted its twentieth anniversary exhibition to a major retrospective of Franz Kline, master of Abstract Expressionism. This contemporary art museum in Turin serves as an appropriate venue for the retrospective, as Kline's work was immensely popular in Italy during his lifetime.

Kline, most closely associated with the New York School of painting, was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania in 1910. After studying in Boston and London, he and his wife Elizabeth permanently settled in New York. The immediate post-war years ushered in an exciting, innovative period in the world of art. New York City quickly became the heart of the contemporary art scene dominated by Kline and his colorful friends and colleagues, including Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock. In the late 1940s, Kline developed his signature white-and-black abstractions. His solo exhibition at the Charles Egan Gallery in 1950 established his reputation as a predominant figure among the action painters.

Previous exhibitions in the United States and Europe have been dedicated to segments of Kline's career, including the traveling memorial exhibition in 1963, organized by the New York Museum of Modern Art and curated by Frank O'Hara and the 1994 exhibition, *Franz Kline: Black & White, 1950-1962*, organized by the Menil Collection, Houston, and curated by David Whitney. The 1985 exhibition, *The Vital Gesture: Franz Kline*, organized by the Cincinnati Art Museum and curated by Harry F. Gaugh, represents the most comprehensive record to date; the accompanying catalog was the first major monograph on the artist. Gaugh's generously illustrated study provides a well researched, chronological survey of Kline's life and work. The current exhibit, *Franz Kline, 1910-1962*, is an expansive retrospective of the artist that encompasses Kline's early charcoal drawings, his more familiar black-and-white canvases, and his later attempts to return to a more varied palette. The equally ambitious catalog contains a collection of essays by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Chief Curator at the Castello di Rivoli; David Anfam, esteemed scholar of Abstract Expressionism; and Dore Ashton, professor of art history at The Cooper Union, who has been writing about Kline since the 1950s. The essays are followed by a collection of seven interviews with Kline.

The topics of discussion in the essays and interviews range from Kline's process of designing on pages torn from telephone books to his fondness for the Old Masters, Japanese prints and Wagner operas. The ques-

tion of precisely how Kline moved from figurative pieces to abstraction is explored but remains unanswered. As Allen Stone queries in his brief essay, “Was he an architect, a calligrapher, a mystic, a Zen master, or merely a superb, disciplined draftsman who learned to give vent to his frustration...?” *Franz Kline 1910-1962* may not resolve the mystery, but it does furnish the reader with a wealth of material for examination.

The catalog features more than seventy major works from collections here and abroad. The extensive array of high quality images range from small-scale sketches to monumental wall paintings. The chronology and anthology include excerpts from exhibition reviews and catalogs. Correspondence by and to the artist and candid photographs of Kline in his studio or with colleagues are interspersed with photographs of his work. Together, the text and images present a vivid portrayal of the artist and his working techniques.

Unfortunately the exhibition will not be traveling to North America. This attractive catalog, however, provides a thought-provoking assessment of Kline’s work, with inviting glimpses into the colorful world in which he worked. It will be a valuable addition to any academic, research or large public library collection, with significant holdings on twentieth-century art.

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