SCHIRN
KUNSTHALLE
FRANKFURT

LEE KRASNER

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WALL PANELS OF THE EXHIBITION

INTRODUCTION

Caustic, combative, unique, honest, brilliant – these are some of the words that friends, family, and colleagues have used to describe Lee Krasner. Without a doubt she was one of the most important painters of post-war modernism in the United States. Over a period of more than 50 years, Krasner developed a unique body of work that she constantly questioned and reinvented. Already at the age of fourteen, Krasner set herself the goal of becoming an artist. She applied to Washington Irving High School, then the only school in New York that offered an art class for girls. Krasner never had any art-related, life-changing experiences in her childhood, no encounters that inspired her choice of profession – only her single-minded conviction. This was helpful during her training at the Women's Art School of Cooper Union and the National Academy of Design, and it later propelled her to the center of a new artistic movement in the US: Abstract Expressionism. This art movement, also called the New York School, developed in the 1940s primarily in New York, brought together artists that were as different as Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Krasner's husband Jackson Pollock. Although the artists of this generation each had different individual styles, they all sought for a new artistic expression. This new pictorial language ought to live up to a world after the catastrophe of World War II and the political exploitation of art for propaganda purposes serving totalitarian regimes. Although many Abstract Expressionists were influenced by European avant-garde artists, like Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, they aimed for a new style that strongly rejected traditional pictorial forms. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Krasner never developed a signature style. She felt this would be "rigid" and "alarming." Instead, she always worked in cycles and often referred back to her own work and to themes she had explored before as a way of developing new artistic forms of expression.

"The one constant in life is change," Krasner said in an interview in 1977. This exhibition of Lee Krasner's paintings and drawings from the 1920s to the 1970s celebrates her versatile and multifaceted body of work and is her first retrospective in Europe in more than 50 years.

ROOMS AND WORKS

BECOMING LEE

Krasner began her art education at the Women's Art School at Cooper Union in 1926 and later attended the National Academy of Design. At both institutions, she quarreled with the teachers and acquired the reputation of being a "difficult" student. Her file at the National Academy said: "This student is always a bother, insists upon having her own way despite school rules." Krasner rebelled not only against the schools' strict regulations, but also their traditional methods of teaching. Most of her teachers preferred an academic, realistic style. European avant-garde art was not part of the curriculum at all, and it was only rarely presented in American cultural institutions. This changed suddenly when the Museum of Modern Art opened in 1929. For its inaugural exhibition, it showed works by Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Georges Seurat, and Vincent van Gogh.

During her years at the Cooper Union and the National Academy, Krasner was also trying to find her own way. Her early self-portraits displayed here illustrate her search for her own identity as a woman and as an artist. Around 1922, Krasner also stopped using her given name "Lena" and began to call herself "Lenore." Around the end of the 1920s, this evolved into the more masculine sounding name "Lee."

Self-Portrait
ca. 1928, Oil on linen
Krasner painted this self-portrait in her parent's garden in Greenlawn, Long Island, in the summer of 1928. She hoped it would gain her promotion to the life drawing class at the National Academy of Design. In order to make it easier to paint the self-portrait, she nailed a mirror to a tree. In later interviews, Krasner mentioned the academy's reaction to her outdoor painting: "That's a dirty trick you played – don't ever pretend that you painted outdoors." Krasner protested and was accepted. In *Self-Portrait*, she presents herself as a self-confident artist wearing a blue shirt and white painter's apron. Krasner probably not only wanted to demonstrate her own determination, but also to refer to historical role models, such as Vincent van Gogh, by the way she painted herself in front of the easel.

Photographs of designs for window displays for the War Services Project (original collages lost)
1942, Photomontage and collage
In his struggle to end the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt promised to help the suffering American people by launching a reform program called the New Deal in 1933. This program also included the Public Works of Art Project, an aid program that commissioned more than 3,700 artists, including Krasner, to embellish public buildings. Many of these New Deal programs lasted for several years, and when the US entered the war, they were continued as War Services Projects that were essential for the war effort. In 1942, Krasner received a commission for one of these projects to design and realize 20 window displays for department stores in Manhattan and Brooklyn. The displays were meant to advertise public civil defense classes at city colleges. Krasner visited several such classes and took pictures of them, including these photographs in her designs. The photo montages combined photography, drawing, and typography. The original designs no longer exist, but documentary photographs of the finished collages provide an impression of the now lost series of works.

LIFE DRAWING
The stock market crash on October 24, 1929 and the following Great Depression left Krasner financially unable to continue her studies, and she was forced to leave the National Academy of Design. She enrolled in a free class at City College and took life drawing lessons at Greenwich House by Job Goodman, who practiced a classic teaching method and aesthetic based on Renaissance art.
In 1937, Krasner received a scholarship to study at the Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts. Hofmann was from Germany and had lived in Paris for several years, where he got to know George Braque, Pablo Picasso, Fernand Léger, and Robert and Sonia Delaunay. Hofmann's art and teaching style were influenced by French Cubism. He believed that the movement and depth in a picture were determined by the tension between forms and colors. Hofmann called this method, which he taught in New York, "push and pull." His approach to the nude was radically different from Krasner's previous training: Instead of focusing on individual parts of the body, he arranged objects around the model and created dramatic lighting to emphasize the relationship between the figure and the surrounding space. The drawings displayed here clearly show Krasner's development toward abstraction, which emerged before the start of World War II.

LITTLE IMAGES
After their marriage in 1945, Krasner and Pollock moved to the town of Springs on Long Island, where they bought a 19th century farm house. In this new environment, Krasner was able to overcome a recent painter's block and develop a new pictorial language. The new series, which she later called "Little Images," marked Krasner's break with Cubism and the European tradition and was the beginning of a new artistic style. The "Little Images" were made on Long Island in

the upper floor of the farm house, where Krasner had established a makeshift studio. She placed each canvas flat on a table or laid it on the floor, working with a steady rhythm directly on the support. For some paintings, she would layer the paint thickly with a palette knife and then work into it with a stiff paint brush. For others, she covered the canvas with a lace overlay of paint that she had thinned down with turpentine in a can. The “Little Images” were created between 1946 and 1950 and can be divided into two phases. The early compositions are freer in style and influenced by Pollock’s all-over technique – a style of painting in which the paint covers the entire surface and often goes over the edges of the painting. In contrast to Pollock, Krasner applied the paint evenly and in a more controlled manner, using traditional oil paint, instead of enamel paint. The later “Little Images” follow a strict grid composition. Krasner described them as “hieroglyphic,” and painted these works from right to left. This working method may be inspired by the Hebrew language, which Krasner was able to write as a child of orthodox Jewish parents, but never learned to read.

Mosaic Table
1947, Mosaic and mixed media on wood
The harsh winter of 1947 forced Krasner to leave her upstairs studio to work on the ground floor, where she could be near the stove. She was very unhappy with this situation, since the ground floor offered her no privacy. Pollock therefore suggested that she try designing some furniture, as they still had very few furnishings in the house. Krasner made two mosaic tables out of old wagon wheels she found in the barn. For the surface of the tables, she used trinkets, keys, coins, broken glass, and leftover tesserae from one of Pollock’s projects for the Work Progress Administration (another New Deal program). The table presented here was shown in the exhibition “The Modern House Comes Alive 1948–49” at the Bertha Schaefer Gallery in September 1948.

Abstract No. 2
1946–1948, Oil on canvas
In the late 1940s, Krasner experimented with a variety of overlapping painting techniques. In *Abstract No. 2*, primarily white forms supplemented by red, blue, and yellow accents are applied to a completely black background. The free-floating white forms were probably inspired by G. Baldwin Brown’s book about prehistoric painting called *The Art of the Cave Dweller* (1931), a copy of which Krasner and Pollock owned.

STABLE GALLERY
In 1951, Krasner had her first solo exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York. While the critical reception of her art was predominately positive, she did not sell any of the works. This left her with feelings of self-doubt. In the hopes of starting a new creative phase, Krasner embarked on a series of black and white drawings, which she attached to the walls of her studio, from the floor to the ceiling. When she came back to the room after a few days, she was disgusted by the drawings, ripped them off the walls and tore them up, leaving the pieces strewn on the floor. After a few weeks, she returned to her studio and was surprised to find “a lot of things there that began to interest me. I began picking up torn pieces of my own drawings and re-gluing them.” Krasner used the paintings she had not sold at Betty Parsons’ as support for these new collages. She took the remains of her own works, as well as pieces of sackcloth, newspaper, and heavy black photo paper and glued them on top of each other, mixing bits of drawings Pollock had discarded in-between. Krasner worked on these “collage paintings” from 1953 to 1956, during which their character changed. While the early collages consisted of very small elements and are dominated by brown hues, the later works reveal larger, more brightly colored forms. Krasner presented her “collage paintings” for the first time at the Stable Gallery in New York in 1955.

Shattered Light
1954, Oil and paper collage on Masonite
Krasner became familiar with the collage technique during her work on the window displays for the War Services Project and through the exhibition “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism” (1937) at the Museum of Modern Art. In her “collage paintings,” she developed her own unique collage technique that was almost painterly in style. In *Shattered Light*, the discarded painting that she used as the support is clearly visible and not completely covered by the collage that has been glued to it. Krasner integrated the small pieces of paper almost seamlessly into the painting, creating a collage that does not clash with it, but rather lets both techniques blend together.

Bald Eagle
1955, Oil, paper and canvas collage on linen
Krasner’s collage technique began with small elements in her early compositions and quickly evolved into bolder and more colorful arrangements in which the materials used are no longer torn only, but also cut. The collages thus resemble Henri Matisse’s late cut-outs. In *Bald Eagle*, Krasner integrated drawings that had been discarded by Pollock, along with pieces of untreated canvas.

PROPHECY
In the summer of 1956, Krasner painted a work that was clearly different from anything she had ever done before. Fleshy forms with sharp, black contours dominate the canvas and create the impression of entwined bodies. *Prophecy* was painted at a time when Pollock’s alcoholism was becoming worse and was beginning to put a strain on their marriage. Krasner recalled that her new work “disturbed me enormously.” It was still on her easel when she traveled to France in July to take some time away from her husband. Her stay was abruptly cut short, however, when she received news of Pollock’s death on August 12. He had crashed his car the night before, killing himself and Edith Metzger, a friend of Pollock’s lover, Ruth Kligman, who had survived. At the age of just 47, Krasner found herself a widow. She flew back to New York the same evening. A few weeks after Pollock’s funeral, she began to paint again. *Prophecy* marked the beginning of a series in which she returned to a figurative style that referred to Cubism and Pablo Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907). The dense masse of limbs and bodiless eyes that inhabit the canvas appear both threatening and erotic at the same time and allude to such universal themes as death, birth, and rebirth. When asked how she could paint in such a time of deep mourning, Krasner answered, “Painting is not separate from life. It is one. It is like asking – do I want to live? My answer is yes – and I paint.”

Prophecy
1956, Oil on cotton duck
The painting’s creation shortly before Pollock’s sudden death as well as its cryptic title make *Prophecy* seem like an artistic premonition. It is not known when Krasner gave the painting this title, or what the actual reference is. In an Interview from 1969, she explained the title by saying that she felt a “new theme coming through.” *Prophecy* is indeed a clear break with her previous series of collages, and it marks Krasner’s return to an almost figurative pictorial language.

NIGHT JOURNEYS
In 1957, Krasner decided to take over Pollock’s studio in the barn. While it must have held painful memories for her, it was also the largest work space on the property and had the best natural light. The new studio offered her the opportunity to work with larger formats. For these, she attached lengths of unstretched canvas directly to the walls. Around 1959, Krasner began a new series of large works. The same year, her mother died. The loss of her mother was a hard blow,

especially so shortly after Pollock's death. Krasner began to suffer from chronic insomnia and worked at night. Her palette became reduced to white and umbra, since she refused to use colors when working with artificial light. The resulting series was named *Night Journeys* by her friend, the poet Richard Howard. Although the paintings were created during a difficult time for Krasner, the *Night Journeys* do not represent a yearning for the past or wallow in grief. Instead, they rank among her most expressive works. Krasner applied the paint to the canvas in wide, rhythmic movements, which was both mentally and physically exhausting. Some of the *Night Journeys* are more than eight feet high. Because Krasner was only 5 feet 3 inches tall, this meant she had to paint using her entire body and sometimes had to jump up with a long-handled brush to reach the farthest corners – each movement of the hand a "gesture of thrust."

The Eye is the First Circle
1960, Oil on canvas
The title *The Eye is the First Circle* is taken from the first sentence of the American philosopher and writer Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay *Circles*, which Krasner's friend, the poet Richard Howard, had given to her. In the essay, Emerson describes the circle as a form that defines everything in nature. This is meant not only in a formal sense, but also (and especially) refers to the natural cycle of life: "*There is no end in nature*, but every end is a beginning," Emerson says. Not only may this idea have offered some comfort to Krasner after Pollock and her mother died within such a short period; it also reflects her own cyclical work method.

PRIMARY SERIES
In the early 1960s, Krasner continued the gestural compositions of the *Night Journeys*, while beginning to add color to her paintings again. When she broke her right arm in a fall in East Hampton in 1963, she taught herself to paint left-handed, squeezing paint directly from the tube and using the fingertips of her right hand to guide the movement. In the following years, her gestures became freer and more calligraphic. The colors in the works Krasner referred to as the "Primary Series" appear almost exuberant and are comparable to the palette of Henri Matisse. Krasner perhaps also gained more self-confidence from a survey of her works that was organized by Bryan Robertson at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 1965. This was her first museum show, and it received very positive reviews. Although she was now regularly working with extremely large formats, Krasner never made sketches or preliminary studies. Instead, each work had to be created from within: "There's a blank, and something begins to happen, and the hope is that it comes through."
In 1968, Krasner rediscovered a pile of paper, which had been handmade by the artist Douglass Morse Howell from Long Island. The paper had accumulated in her studio over the years. She decided to use it to create four series of works called *Seed, Earth, Water,* and *Hieroglyphs*, all of which are exhibited in the neighboring room. In these drawings, Krasner plays with the motifs named in the titles, in addition to referring to her own earlier themes and forms. While working on the series, she experimented with the simplicity of using only one or two colors of gouache and the reaction of the pigments with the textured paper.

Icarus
1964, Oil on canvas
After Krasner broke her right arm due to a fall, she had to adapt her working method to this new circumstance. She practiced working with her left arm, and she guided the movements with tips of her right hand. Her compositions became more fragmented into small elements, while also gaining more dynamics and directness. She often squeezed the paint out of the tube directly onto the canvas and worked it with her fingertips.

Kufic
1965, Oil on canvas
The title of the painting *Kufic* derives from one of the oldest forms of Arabic script. The use of unprimed canvas, onto which she applied hues of ochre in sweeping, gestural movements, was unusual for Krasner who was fascinated by calligraphy and characters her entire life. She learned to write Hebrew as a child, but she never knew how to read it. Later, she often visited the Morgan Library to look at the ancient and Oriental manuscripts. She was also excited to attend a lecture by Meyer Schapiro about the *Book of Kells*, a mediaeval script believed to have originated in Ireland in the 8th or 9th century.

PALINGENESIS
In 1973, Krasner presented twelve new paintings at the Marlborough Gallery in New York. Unlike the organic compositions of the *Primary Series*, in her new works, Krasner employed sharp-edged, abstract forms with starkly contrasting colors. While this new pictorial language might resemble the Color Field painting of Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, Krasner already had used similar forms in her photo collages for the War Services Project and in the collage works she made in the 1950s. In this later series of works, Krasner's ceaseless experimentation in her studio and her reluctance to establish a signature style can clearly be seen. She fittingly titled one of the main works *Palingenesis*, which means "rebirth." She said in an interview in 1972 that "evolution, growth and change go on. Change is life." Her works from the early 1970s also played a major role in the exhibition "Lee Krasner. Large Paintings", which took place at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 1973. This was Krasner's first solo exhibition at a major museum in New York.

ELEVEN WAYS
During a visit to Krasner's studio in Springs in 1974, the curator Bryan Robertson came across an old portfolio of drawings. Inside was a trove of studies in charcoal from the time when Krasner had studied at Hans Hofmann's school. On the backside of several sheets were ghostlike charcoal imprints since Krasner had not used a fixative. She selected several drawings to be framed and took the others to her apartment in Manhattan with the intent of destroying them later. When she rediscovered the drawings in 1975, she decided to use them as materials for a new series of collages. This time, instead of tearing up the drawings, as she had done with the collages for the Stable Gallery in 1953, Krasner used scissors. The result was a series of unusual collages with sharp-edged forms that echo the dynamic lines of the original life drawings. Krasner incorporated some of the spectral images that appeared on the reverse of some of the sheets, while leaving other areas of the canvas empty, echoing the impression of the empty space around the nude model. The collages were shown at the Pace Gallery in New York in 1977 under the title "Eleven Ways to Use the Words to See". Each is named after a different verb form. As in her early collages, in *Eleven Ways* Krasner explores her own work critically, while also addressing her artistic legacy. She described the references to her earlier works as a moment of self-assurance and clarification by saying, "If I'm going back on myself, I'd like to think it's a form of growth."

BIOGRAPHY

1908
Lee Krasner was born in Brooklyn, New York, on October 27. Her family had emigrated to the US from a small village near Odessa, Russia (now Ukraine), fleeing brutal pogroms and the Russo-Japanese War. She was the first child in the family to be born in the US.

1922
Krasner applied to Washington Irving High School in Manhattan, which was the only public school in the New York metropolitan area that offered an art class for girls.

1926
In February, Krasner began studying at the Women's Art School at Cooper Union in Manhattan.

1928
Krasner left the Cooper Union after the spring semester and worked as a nude model. In July, she enrolled at the Art Students League.
Also in July, her older sister Rose died unexpectedly, leaving behind a husband and two young daughters. Krasner refused to marry her sister's widower, disobeying traditional Jewish custom.
In September, Krasner began studying at the National Academy of Design. This was the first time she attended mixed-gender classes.

1930
In January, the exhibition "Painting in Paris" opened at the Museum of Modern Art. Krasner visited the exhibition and her encounter with "live Matisses and Picassos" left a lasting impression on her.

1931
Most of Krasner's early works were destroyed in a fire in her parents' home.

1932
In April, Krasner was forced to leave the National Academy for financial reasons. She enrolled in free classes at the City College of New York.
She worked part-time as a waitress in the nightclub Sam Johnson's in Greenwich Village, which was a meeting place for artists and writers. There, she got to know many people, including the writer Harold Rosenberg.

1933
The Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) was founded in December to fight the effects of the Great Depression. More than 3,700 artists were commissioned to create works for public buildings. Krasner was also employed by the PWAP.

1937
Krasner enrolled in the School of Fine Arts, which was a private institution founded by the German painter Hans Hofmann in 1932.
Her works were shown to the public for the first time in the exhibition "Pink Slips Over Culture" in the ACA Galleries, New York.

1938
Harold Rosenberg introduced Krasner to the art critic Clement Greenberg.

1939
Krasner became a board member of the Artists Union and joined the organization American Abstract Artists (AAA).

1940
In April, Krasner took part in an AAA demonstration in front of the Museum of Modern Art in protest of the exclusion of abstract art from its exhibition program.

1941
The artist John Graham asked Krasner to participate in the show *American and French Painting* at the McMillen Gallery. Krasner later recalled that the only American painter in the exhibition that she had never heard of before was Jackson Pollock. Soon after, she visited him in his studio, which was only one block away from hers.

1942
In May, Krasner was commissioned by the War Services Project to overlook the design and production of large window display advertisements for department stores all over New York City.

1944
Krasner's father died on November 17 after a two-year illness.

1945
Krasner and Pollock were married in New York on October 25. In November, they bought an old clapboard farm house in the town of Springs on Long Island.

1946
In the spring, Krasner achieved a breakthrough with a new series of works, which she called "Little Images."

1947
Krasner began using the upstairs bedroom at the house in Springs as a studio, while Pollock remodeled the barn into a studio for himself.

1951
Both Krasner and Pollock took part in The Club's *"*Ninth Street Exhibition*"*, which was organized by Leo Castelli in an empty store located at 60 East 9th Street.
In October, Krasner's first solo exhibition "Paintings 1951. Lee Krasner*"* opened at the Betty Parsons Gallery. She showed 14 works, but none of them sold. She later reused many of these paintings for the collages she exhibited at the Stable Gallery in 1955.

1956
During the summer, Krasner worked on a painting she would later call *Prophecy.*
Pollock's alcoholism was becoming worse. In July, Krasner gave him an ultimatum before leaving by herself on a journey to Europe, which they had originally planned together.
On August 12, Krasner received news of Pollock's death while in Paris. He had crashed his car the previous evening while driving with his lover Ruth Kligman and her friend Edith Metzger. Kligman was the only one to survive.

1957
In the summer, Krasner began using Pollock's studio in the barn. However, she decided she no longer wanted to live by herself at the house in Springs, and she moved back to Manhattan in the fall. From then on, she split her time between the countryside and the city.

1958
B.H. Friedman, the vice president of the Uris Buildings Corporation, commissioned Krasner to design two large mosaics for the company's headquarters in downtown Manhattan.

1959
Krasner's mother died. Her mother's passing so soon after Pollock's death caused Krasner to suffer a deep depression.
She began a series of works that became known as the *Umber Series* or *Night Journeys*. Because she was suffering from insomnia, she painted these pictures at night.

1963
In the summer, Krasner moved back to Springs. While taking a walk one day, she became dizzy and fell, breaking her right arm. Although right-handed, she managed to continue working with her right hand in a cast.

1965
The retrospective "Lee Krasner. Paintings, Drawings and Collages" opened at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in September.

1969
Krasner made four series of small calligraphic color experiments in gouache on paper called *Earth, Water, Seed,* and *Hieroglyphs*.
The same year, Krasner was the only female artist to take part in the exhibition "The New American Painting and Sculpture. The First Generation" at the Museum of Modern Art.

1972
On April 12, Krasner joined the group Women in the Arts and demonstrated in front of the Museum of Modern Art in protest of its failure to acknowledge female artists.
1973
In November, the Whitney Museum of American Art presented the show "Lee Krasner. Large Paintings". It was Krasner's first solo exhibition at a major museum in New York.

1976
Krasner participated in the exhibition "Women Artists. 1550–1950" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

1977
In February, her show "Eleven Ways to Use the Words to See" opened at Pace Gallery. For the eleven large collages, Krasner cut up and reused charcoal drawings she had made between 1937 and 1940 while studying at Hofmann's school.

1978
"Abstract Expressionism. The Formative Years" opened at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. The exhibition then traveled on to Seibu Museum in Tokyo, and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. It was the first major exhibition to honor Krasner's major role as one of the first Abstract Expressionists.

1982
Krasner was awarded the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres on January 11.

1983
In celebration of Krasner's 75th birthday, the exhibition "Lee Krasner. A Retrospective" opened at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. It then traveled to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia; the Phoenix Art Museum in Arizona; and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

1984
On May 20, Krasner was awarded an honorary doctorate of fine arts from the State University of New York, Stony Brook.
Krasner died in the New York Hospital in Manhattan on June 19.