

Part II: Women Artists from 1920's to the 1960's

This historical survey of women artists and their work ends with the 1960's. It had been just that, a survey designed to present an introduction to and an overview of women's art history up to the end of modernism and the advent of feminism. There is more research to be done, more informational gaps to be filled in, and within the context of this half course, limitations with regard to the number of artists that could be considered. The same can be said for the period from 1920 to the end of the 1960's. There were myriads of women artists who worked within this period, albeit an encouraging sign but one that makes selection difficult. In the period of the fifty years in question, there is also a diverse range of social and political conditions, styles and mediums within which these women worked but there were also commonalities. An overview of the above is presented in this unit.

WOMEN ARTISTS AND MODERNISM

In this part of the unit, many of the women artists discussed are from the United States. (Canadian women artists will be discussed in Unit 5) There are reasons why the women artists of Europe figure less prominently than they did during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The centre of the art world shifted from Paris to New York and this city's function was similar to that of Paris at the end of the nineteenth century-i.e., a city in which art styles were created and assimilated, and a city to which artists gravitated because of its creative energy, idea exchange market and art infrastructure with its art galleries, dealers, and critics. New York began to assume such importance after World War I when some of the most influential European artists emigrated to the United States and specifically to New York. The position of the city as an art centre was solidified as the conditions prior to World War II made Europe a less than desirable place to live and many more artists left Europe for the United States and artistic freedom. Positions were made available to these artists on art faculties. Many of their students were American and Canadian women who revered these new mentors.

A number of these artists were from the Bauhaus, an art school founded in 1922 in the Weimar Republic and disbanded with the rise to power of Hitler in Germany in the 1930's. The Bauhaus had as its aim the uniting of art and industry. It trained artists, designers, architects in a common creative language. Seventy five percent of the students at the Bauhaus were women and yet only two of the teaching masters, **Sophie Tauber-Arp** and **Anni Albers**, were women and they were

associated with the weaving studio. Similarly, its list of graduates and their accomplishments includes very few women, a scattering in textile design. Perhaps the war obliterated the school's actual achievements with regard to educating women.

At the same time in Europe. Specifically in Paris, the Surrealist movement was at its zenith, and there were a number of women participants such as **Kay Sage**, **Dorothea Tanning** and **Leonora Carrington**. Surrealism crossed the Atlantic but most American women artists were not followers of this style. Instead, during the 1920's and 1930's American women artists along with their male counterparts were involved in either social art or Regionalism, an attempt to establish an "American" style that related to the region in which they lived. This, of course, was the era of the Great Depression and strangely enough, women artists flourished. Forty percent of the artists involved in the Workers for Public Art program (*one of the programs designed to create work, established by the federal government under President Franklin Roosevelt during the Great Depression*) were women, and many of the same women were involved in the federal Art Projects program as well. At least with these assistance programs, artists were guaranteed a wage and commissions. Nevertheless, even before the Depression, women were involved, not just as artists, but in the service of art as administrators, patrons, supporters of the arts and crafts movement. It was not difficult for those who pursued a fine arts degree to find a position in the art world. There were even exhibitions devoted exclusively to women's work.

The climate for women artists during the early part of the twentieth century was neither encouraging nor discouraging. Women artists maintained a status quo. Accessibility to art education was no longer a particular problem, and pursuing a career in the arts was not as socially unacceptable as it once had been. It would seem that it was the end of the Second World War that brought a halt to women's equal involvement in the arts. After WWII, women were to pursue marriage and raising a family as a career just as they were after the French Revolution. Moreover, the "gods" of the new Abstract Expressionism movement were all men. William de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, and Hans Hoffman, who were immigrants, and Jackson Pollock, who was American, were the rulers of the New York art world. There were women involved in the beginnings of the Abstract Expressionist movement-Elaine de Kooning, Lee Krasner and Helen Frankenthaler-but they were overshadowed by the publicity given to the male artists. For many other potential women artists, art education was available but with subtle or hidden restrictions.

It was difficult for a woman artist to be taken seriously or even to take her own work seriously when little encouragement was received from any quarter. However, many women did persist and it is the work of these women that is considered in this

unit: artists such as **Barbara Hepworth, Germaine Richier, Isabel Bishop, Alice Neel, Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell, Helen Frankenthaler, Louise Nevelson, Frida Kahlo and Eva Hesse**. These are the "Old Mistresses" or the matriarchs of the "modern" period, the ones whose reputations have been undeniably established and survived the art historically necessary test of time. For these women artists and their art, there are few common denominators: the circumstances of their lives and "success" are quite different and yet all have become role models for successive waves of contemporary women artists.

Germaine Richier

A number of these women artists worked/work in the medium of sculpture. **Germaine Richier** (1904-1959-French) is the first French woman sculptor whose work is encountered in the twentieth century. She was certainly not encouraged to become an artist by her family but chose to follow her own dictates and interests. Never interested in drawing, she was someone who, even as a child, had been interested in working in three-dimensional forms. She combined this with an interest in nature to produce incredibly original sculptures. She interpreted the natural cycles of life and remained true to this subject in spite of the fact that she lived in Paris during the formative years of Surrealism. She began exhibiting in 1934 and received many awards in France for her work. Included in texts on modern sculpture, which are very reasonable in their consideration of women sculptors, she perhaps has not been given the credit for the originality of her work. Never departing from the human figure, although sometimes incorporating it with insect like forms, she experimented with new casting techniques in bronze. Bronze became filament or web-like figures that were elongated and became macabre or sinister as in *The Batman*. There was a reason for this because, before her death from cancer in 1959, Richier had lived through two world wars and her work reflects the Age of Anxiety of Post War Europe.

Barbara Hepworth

Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975, English) is another woman sculptor whose work is equally as individualistic. Unfortunately, her contemporary, Henry Moore, has overshadowed her. Both spent long years working without money and recognition, primarily because their work was too innovative for a British public that couldn't accept smoothness of form and required a work to have a mildly frenetic surface to be considered expressive or creative. Yet Barbara Hepworth's forms were influenced by nature, such as the water-washed rocks and shells from the sea beside her studio in St. Ives in Cornwall, England. In 1931, she produced

her *Pierced Form*, piercing the stone to make a hole a space and this became the basis of her work in the years to come. It was also central to Henry Moore's work and although the concept has often been attributed to Henry Moore, it was Barbara Hepworth who originated it. She worked within the constraints of finances and family, being the mother of a son and triplets, and the wife of the painter Ben Nicholson, all of which she discussed towards the end of her life in an interview with the American feminist art critic Cindy Nemser in *Art Talk*. When time and money permitted, Barbara Hepworth worked on a large scale. The most famous of her large-scale works is the monument to Dag Hammarskold, *Single Form (Memorial)*, 1961-62 in front of the United Nations Building in New York. Another work, *Never Again War* is twenty-one feet high and Hepworth worked on the form of this sculpture quite logically by working from a stepladder. She scoffed at critics who suggested that a sculptor had to be male and strong to deal with material and scale. Problems of scale were easily overcome by a woman sculptor and as for strength Hepworth said, "It's not the strength which does it, it's a rhythm." She used this rhythm to work out her idea of beauty in stone or wood in a perfect combination of organic or geometric forms. Abstract forms leave little room to suggest content; however, Hepworth's use of two forms, one large and one small has been considered suggestive of a mother-child relationship. Just before she died in a fire in her studio, Barbara Hepworth was questioned by Cindy Nemser about being a woman artist. She stated, "my work is inevitably feminine because it's my own experience."

Louise Nevelson

To continue with woman sculptors, **Louise Nevelson** (1899-1988, American) is another artist whose work is highly individualistic. She worked in a traditional material-wood-but not in a traditional way. She built totems, structures, environments out of the wood debris from Manhattan back alleys. These forms in black, gold or white were not mainstream sculpture and it was not until she was in her late fifties that Louise Nevelson received positive critical acclaim for her work. This is all the more interesting in that she did not begin her career as a sculptor until she was forty, although she felt that she had always had a predisposition to art and from childhood had always stated that she wanted to be a sculptor. It was typical of women artists to excel in the latter half of their lives. It took a lot of determination for a woman to be an artist and this same determination was applied to the desire to succeed. Certainly, Louise Nevelson succeeded even though, as she was often known to have stated, "to sculpt you had to have balls." For a period of time in the sixties and early seventies her work was exhibited in Toronto at the Dunkleman Gallery and it was at this time that the art Gallery of Ontario purchased one of her works, *Night Zag IV*, 1965.

Eva Hesse

Eva Hesse (1936-1970, German) did not live to continue her work for which she was receiving critical acclaim before her death from a brain tumour at the age of thirty-four. She was, she felt free to experiment with a multiplicity of materials-plastics, fiberglass resins, latex. Her work was in essence existential. Her goal in art was to depict the ultimate truth and she always said that she wanted to work against every rule. Conventional materials were bypassed as were sculptural forms and in their place Eva Hesse knotted, wrapped and even hung forms from the ceiling as in *Contingent*, 1968-69. In her work, she accepted chaos and accident as part of the process of discovery-the end result being that many of her works have disintegrated over time but this is as Hesse would have wanted. With the patronage of a German industrialist, she was freed from financial restrictions and could experiment experimentally. Ironically, it was Hesse's interest in process and not in a finished permanent product that resulted in her own death, as it is now known that there are serious health hazards associated with the synthetic mediums that she used.

American Surrealists

The women painters of this period were equally as individualistic. Some were participants in the Surrealist movement with its beginnings in the 1920's in Europe, but whose subject matter continued to be of interest to artists. The women artists mentioned here varied in their relationship to the Surrealist movement. **Dorothea Tanning** (b. 1910, American) and **Kay Sage** (1898-1963, American) were both Americans who encountered surrealism initially in New York and ultimately in Paris. Both were associated with male surrealist artists, Tanning with Max Ernst and Sage with Yves Tinguay; and both created work that was very different from that of their male counterparts. Kay Sage's work depicts an architecture of "poetic shelters" with little human content. Dorothea Tanning's work on the other hand presents us with a goldmine of female images, her primary subject matter centred on the stages of women's sexual awareness in true surrealist terms using ambiguous landscapes, people and architectural forms.

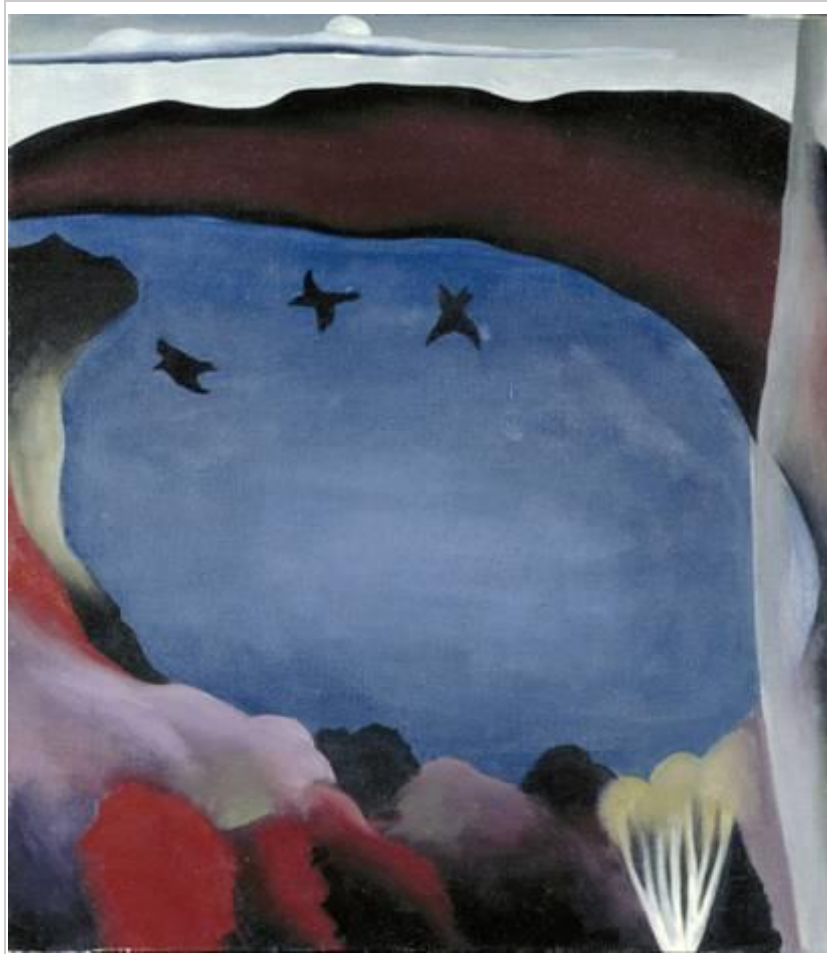
Frida Kahlo

The most important woman surrealist painter is the Mexican painter **Frida Kahlo** (1910-1954, Mexican). Her work has been exhibited frequently in recent years and a movie made about her life. Frida Kahlo was claimed by the Surrealists

as one of their own and her art promoted by them. She saw her work differently and although it appears to reference a dream world, albeit one that is, for the viewer disconcerting, it actually depicted for the artist her own reality. Her reality was harsh. Disabled in an unfortunate accident when she was fifteen, she used her art as a means of expressing her relationship to her culture, her condition and her husband, Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. The painting of Frida Kahlo's which is most frequently illustrated is one that is actually an account of her miscarriages of the children that she so desperately wanted. It is deliberately naïve, with folk elements, starkness, brutality and raw emotion. This was her reality; it was not the dream world of the Surrealists. And yet it is interesting that Andre Breton, the prominent Surrealist art critic, promoted her work as that of a Surrealist when he paid little attention to the other women Surrealists. Dorothea Tanning, on the other hand, a committed woman surrealist painter, stated that "the place of a woman among the Surrealists was no different from that which they occupied among the general population in general." (Orenstein 3) The implication was that the woman artists did not occupy a position of equality.

Georgia O'Keeffe

There has been a considerable amount written about **Georgia O'Keeffe** (1887-1986, American). One such biography, Laura Lisle's *Portrait of an Artist* must have been very difficult to write, given that the artist did not grant interviews from her home in Abiquiu, New Mexico or make statements about her work. In piecing together a history of her work, one finds in her past that same single-minded determination to become an artist. Her early training and in fact her life was devoted to the pursuit of her art. Her association, both personal and professional with Alfred Stieglitz, a New York photographer and avant-garde gallery owner, certainly assisted her career. Steiglitz exhibited her work for the first time in 1917 and on a regular basis thereafter. Some of Georgia O'Keeffe's subject matter was controversial. Her large flower paintings, which she painted in New York, had possible sexual content which O'Keeffe herself denied. The city was not to her liking, resulting in a nervous breakdown-an interesting parallel to the life of the Canadian artist Emily Carr and she travelled west to New Mexico to find solace in the landscape. (The paintings of Frida Kahlo, Emily Carr and Georgia O'Keeffe have been brought together recently in an exhibition that toured internationally.)



Georgia O'Keeffe: George Lake with Crows (1921)

<http://cybermuseum.ca>

In the winters, she returned to Steiglitz, the stimulus of New York, and the contemporary art circle: and the summers she spent in New Mexico. This pattern continued until 1946 when Steiglitz died. A permanent move to New Mexico was made at this time after which O'Keeffe's paintings such as *The Grey Hills*, 1942 featured the New Mexican landscape form the broad expanse of the sky to the bleached bones of the desert. She followed her own course and worked within her own personal iconography from 1946 onwards.

Isabel Bishop

For her work and her contribution to American art, Georgia O'Keeffe was honoured by President Carter along with other American women artists who contributed significantly to the arts: Isabel Bishop, Alice Neel, Louise Nevelson. These women

were all in their eighties when they were honoured and all had had long and productive careers. Isabel Bishop and Alice Neel shared an interest in the human figure. As well, both carried out their careers in New York. **Isabel Bishop's** (1902-1988, American) work came to the fore during the Depression years when there was a strong interest in the United States in painting referred to as Social Realism. The expression of the human condition, the content of social realism was the principal content of Isabel's Bishop's work and remained so throughout her career. Her paintings reflect, in the golden tones of Rembrandt, to which Bishop added her own technique of transparent layering, the people of Union Square, the everyday people, particularly the women: women walking on the street, on the subway, waiting with their children. Yet the proportions of these figures render them anything but ordinary. Bishop's later work became more abstract and yet still included the human figure passing across the picture planes as in *Men and Girls Walking*, 1969.

Alice Neel

Alice Neel's (1900-1984, American) subject matter in her paintings also depicts the human condition. "You can't leave humanity out," she said simply. "If you didn't have the humanity you wouldn't have anything?" Her humanity in her portraits takes the form of the interior person, the soul exposed on canvas. A realistic rendering of a figure is irrelevant and to entrust the painting of one's portrait to Alice Neel, one had to be prepared for an unconventional result. She painted those who have passed her way during the years; lovers, family, neighbours in Harlem where she lived until 1962, activists, political figures, Andy Warhol, curators. She also painted women-pregnant women, nursing mothers with infants. These women are representative of the cycles of nature that women experience and yet at the same time, Alice Neel is presenting us with a portrait of an individual and an individual's experience of these cycles. *Carmen and Baby*, 1972 depicts the cycle of mother and child in an image that is both individual and universal. The depiction of the nude pregnant woman has never been an important subject, not even within the context of women's work, but it is of importance to Alice Neel and remained a constant theme throughout her long career.

Abstract Expressionists

The last group of women artists that will be discussed are all related in terms of the style of their work, to a movement that had its beginnings in New York after the second world war and came to full strength during the 1950's. **Lee Krasner (1908-1984, American)** and **Elaine deKooning (b. 1920, American)** were at

the forefront of this movement but not by reputation, rather by association with major male figures, their husbands: Jackson Pollock and Wilhelm de Kooning. And yet both women were painters in this same style. Their marriages to these most important artists of the Abstract expressionist movement meant that they were both overshadowed by the "giant" reputations of Pollock and de Kooning. Both Lee Krasner and Elaine de Kooning were artists in their own right whose work should have received more notice in its time. Instead, they both worked within the shadow of their spouses. Neither woman stopped making art nor did either woman produce work that was readily identifiable with that of their artist husbands. That is not to say that the work of the women artists was not as progressive, as contemporary, as involved with abstract expressionism. Lee Krasner's work with its overall surface movement and paint applications was not as unstructured as Jackson Pollock's work. A cryptic code, a personal form of hieroglyphic writing appears from beneath the surface texture. Lee Krasner continued to use this code in her paintings throughout her long career as may be seen in *Abstract No.2*, 1946-48.

Helen Frankenthaler

Helen Frankenthaler (b. 1928, American) had a similar association with abstract expressionism and acknowledged the fact that Jackson Pollock influenced her work directly. However, her own canvasses such as *Tangerine*, 1964 indicate that she developed an identity of her own as she worked through the end of abstract expressionism and into colour field painting. Her "soak and stain" method of applying paint to large areas of canvas did influence other abstract painters. Frankenthaler's work was frequently defined as feminine or intuitive but this was not necessarily a compliment because critics decried its lack of a basis in theory.