

# Motherwell, Nevelson and Frankenthaler

Gifts from the Lillian Rojzman Berkman Collection

February 22 - May 20, 2001

## On Paper: Motherwell, Frankenthaler, Nevelson

When artists transfer their knowledge and skills as painters or sculptors to paper, the results are often remarkable. Paper offers a freedom and flexibility that invites the artists to explore new ways of making images using ink and various printmaking techniques. The art-making process becomes more social. Robert Motherwell was attracted to printmaking because collaboration with master printmakers freed him from the isolation of painting, and for the print's accessibility to a wider public.

All three artists, Motherwell (1915-1991), Helen Frankenthaler (b. 1928), and Louise Nevelson (1899-1988) are among the first rank of mid-century contributors to modern art. Motherwell and Frankenthaler are known for their contributions to abstraction in painting, while Nevelson is best known for her wood sculptures of black and white assemblages.

Based on their geographic and social origins, as well as their beginnings in art, the grouping of these three artists would seem unlikely. Motherwell from the West Coast and Frankenthaler from the East Coast are from privileged American backgrounds, while Nevelson who was born in the Ukraine was for a time in 1937 employed in the United States Works Progress Administration.

Motherwell was initially attracted to philosophy and psychoanalysis before encountering art historian Meyer Shapiro who encouraged him to become a painter. His work is strongly influenced by the Surrealists through Matta and other contacts, and by Asian calligraphic arts and Zen. Frankenthaler, the younger of the three, focused on painting from the beginning, and evolved through a series of painterly influences from Kandinsky to Rufino Tamayo to Pollock who, along with the critic Clement Greenberg, was her principal mentor. She is best known for her experiments with stain painting.

Nevelson prepared herself for a career in the arts, initially focused on performance—as an actress, dancer, singer—as well as a painter, as she studied and worked in New York, also in Munich, Berlin, and Vienna, before turning to sculpture. Hans Hofmann was her principal mentor in the visual arts, first in Germany and later in New York where both were forced to emigrate by the political threat in Europe.

Apart from their having been linked together in the donor's gift, the three artists share, among other things, a desire to create images without relying on inherited iconography. In their art, the subject matter, to the extent that any exists, is invented in the picture-making process. Spontaneity and restlessness lead to constant invention of new forms. There is hardly any figurative imagery, although it is not out of the question to imagine being confronted by Jungian archetypes concealed in the abstract forms, or even an occasional figurative representation. All three artists seem to favor organic over geometric construction of the picture space, but Motherwell at least works with



Robert Motherwell, *Signs on White*, 1981  
Lift ground etching and aquatint 35/59  
20 x 28 in., 2000.24.12

both. All three appear to emphasize flatness over illusion in accordance with the tenets of abstract Modern art, although some of the surface tension is achieved by a delicate interplay between physicality (flatness) of the canvas and illusion, especially in Frankenthaler's images. All three work in large and even monumental scale, while abandoning the easel.

A careful scrutiny will certainly uncover important differences. Motherwell and Nevelson favor black in their prints, though not exclusively, while Frankenthaler's palette often extends to beige colors, mauves, greens, oranges, or unusual mixes of these. Motherwell's images are from the interior, psychological states, while Frankenthaler often uses nature as a source for her imagery. By comparison to the other two, Nevelson's two dimensional images rely more on linear structure and texture with a greater degree of illusion than is found in the other two artists' work.

While it is not necessary to make the case here for abstraction in art, it is useful to ask what can the viewer take away from experiencing these works? Possibly the most important thought is to realize again that art and life are not limited to inherited ways of thinking and being. It is possible to invent new ways of making and appreciating art for those who are willing to suspend their dependency on the familiar.



Louise Nevelson, *Noble Lady*, 1953-55  
Etching and aquatint 2/20  
19 3/4 x 15 1/2 in., 2000.24.21

Curtis L. Carter  
Director

# Checklist

## *The Collection represents gifts from Lillian Rojzman Berkman*

### **Helen Frankenthaler**

American (b.1928)

#### *Composition*

Lithograph 81/100

28 x 21 7/8 in.

2000.24.1

*Yellow Jack*, 1987

Lithograph and stencil 8/12

29 3/4 x 38 in.

2000.24.2

*Untitled*, 1991

Monotype

38 x 25 in.

2000.24.3

*Tout a Coup*, 1987

Color aquatint 43/46

66 x 33 1/2 in.

2000.24.4

### **Robert Motherwell**

American (1915-1991)

*Calligraphy*, 1965-66

Lithograph 51/80

15 x 22 in.

2000.24.5

*Summertime in Italy #12*, 1965-66

Lithograph (trial proof)

29 x 20 in.

2000.24.6

*To Arp*, 1966

Lithograph (proofs)

10 x 22 in. each

2000.24.7.1-2

*Untitled (from the Peace Portfolio)*,  
1970

Silkscreen 45/175

26 x 21 in.

2000.24.8

*A la pintura* portfolio, 1971

24 leaves with 21 color aquatints and  
letterpress

25 1/2 x 38 in. each

2000.24.9.1-.24

*Untitled*, 1972-73

Lift ground etching and aquatint 18/50

36 x 24 in.

2000.24.10

*Soot Black Stone, #s 2, 4, and 5*, 1973

Three lithographs (annotated PPII)

30 x 18 1/8 in.

2000.24.11.1-3

*Signs on White*, 1981

Lift ground etching and aquatint 35/59

20 x 28 in.

2000.24.12

*In Celebration*, 1975

Offset color lithograph 97/200

24 x 12 in.

2000.24.13

### **Louise Nevelson**

American (1899-1988)

*Distant Land*

Painted black wood sculpture

22 1/4 x 50 x 8 1/4 in.

2000.24.14

*Blue and Black*

Color lithograph (Bon a tirer  
printer's proof)

33 x 23 in.

2000.24.15

*Dawnlight*, 1965

Lithograph 1/8

20 3/4 x 25 1/2 in.

2000.24.16

*Innerview*, 1965

Lithograph 11/15

22 3/4 x 19 in.

2000.24.17

*Solid Reflections*, 1953-55

Etching and aquatint 7/20

27 1/4 x 21 3/4 in.

2000.24.18

*Jungle Figures*, 1953-55

Etching and aquatint 7/20

23 1/4 x 19 3/4 in.

2000.24.19

*Trees*, 1953-55

Etching and aquatint 6/20

13 3/4 x 21 3/4 in.

2000.24.20

*Noble Lady*, 1953-55

Etching and aquatint 2/20

19 3/4 x 15 1/2 in.

2000.24.21

*Composition*

Lithograph (trial proof)

22 x 17 in.

2000.24.22

*The Search*, 1953-55

Etching and aquatint 2/20

21 3/4 x 17 5/8 in.

2000.24.23

*The Magic Garden in Sea-Land*, 1953-55

Etching and aquatint 8/20

14 3/4 x 16 1/2 in.

2000.24.24

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