

MNUCHIN GALLERY

Mac Adam, Alfred. "Franz Kline." *brooklynrail.org* (*The Brooklyn Rail*), May 2025.



Franz Kline, *Untitled*, 1957. Oil on canvas, 79 x 112 1/8 inches. Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery. © 2025 The Franz Kline Estate and Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Somewhere in the Hollenback Cemetery in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, Franz Kline waits alone for resurrection. It is a simple gravesite made for two, but Kline's wife Elizabeth Parsons, buried elsewhere, is absent from his death, just as her degenerating schizophrenia rendered her absent from his life. Unlike Jackson Pollock, whose wife Lee Krasner is present in death; her grave marker—a small boulder—is eclipsed by his own massive boulder in the Green River Cemetery in East Hampton. Both men died prematurely, Kline (1910-1962) of rheumatic heart disease when he was fifty-one and Pollock (1912-1956) in a car crash when he was forty-four. Born in provincial settings, of modest means, both come to New York and find their artistic identities.

They make their way to abstraction but take two very separate paths. Pollock, influenced by the Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, quickly abandons figuration to pursue the dreamscapes that emerge from years of Jungian psychoanalysis and exposure to Surrealism. What brought Kline to abstraction is more mysterious: using Willem de Kooning's Bell-Opticon projector to see a blown-up image of his painting

MNUCHIN GALLERY

of Elizabeth's rocking chair, her mental disintegration, despair that his figurative work was going nowhere. Who knows? Probably all the above and more. But the fact is that the American figurative tradition, personified by Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975), shaped his artistic formation, and the concrete result is Kline's 1945 Lehighton mural, a panoramic view of his hometown, painted to hang behind the bar at the local American Legion Post and now in the Allentown Art Museum.



Installation view: Franz Kline, Mnuchin Gallery, New York, 2025. Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery. © 2025 The Franz Kline Estate and Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Tom Powel Imaging.

The 14-foot painting is simultaneously an aerial view and a panoramic face-to-face view of Lehighton. We seem to look down and simultaneously back and up from the primary focal point. Kline mixes perspectives to make reality conform to his vision, but the work is also an autobiographical reminiscence, a recapturing not of the actual town of Lehighton but of Kline's memory of it. Landscape and its domestic partner, still life, infused with self-expression are Kline's point of departure. What links the places in the Lehighton mural to Kline's portrait of his wife's empty chair is the facticity of the given universe: the figurative Kline reconfigures reality, but he does not invent it. Perhaps de Kooning's projector opened the way to another possibility: an ungiven, incomplete universe Kline could create for himself.

The chair rendered abstract by projection paradoxically allowed him to return to his origins in draftsmanship and cartooning. His new paintings would be drawings realized by another means. The Mnuchin Gallery has gathered twenty-four paintings and drawings made between 1950 and 1960, the greatest decade in Kline's brief career. This is a unique opportunity to see exactly what Kline's contribution was and, simultaneously, to experience stages in the gestation of two important pieces. While we may think Action painting consisted in wildly assaulting a canvas with paint and brushes, we see here that premeditation and self-awareness govern artistic frenzy.

MNUCHIN GALLERY

Two instances exemplify the process. The first pairing includes *Study for Chief*, an 8 by 10-inch oil drawing on newsprint (often the only paper Kline had) made about 1950, and *Chief*, a 58 by 73-inch oil on canvas, made in 1950. The second pairing is *Untitled (Study for Untitled, 1957)* 8 1/2 by 11-inches, oil and ink on paper, made about 1957, and *Untitled*, a 79 by 103-inch oil on canvas, made in 1957. The *Chief* is a huge locomotive from Kline's Leighton mural, but there is no locomotive recognizable in either the drawing or the canvas. Each could stand as an independent work of art, but as we look from one to the other, we see that the oil painting lets in more light, as if the sheet of newsprint constrained the composition. The dominating black of the drawing generates an ominous feeling in the viewer, while the greater presence of white in the canvas suggests that the black shape is a form standing in some unearthly space, liberated from a matrix. The transition from drawing to canvas in the two untitled works involves more radical changes. The surface of the drawing is jam-packed, with the white areas on the right almost creating a plane leading up to a dense forest of black trees. The large canvas is filled with white space, the jagged structure in black a play of horizontal and vertical strokes suggestive of a cityscape. That Kline resorted to preliminary studies brings home the point that his move into abstraction was a matter of translating shaped ideas into dialectical oppositions (white versus black) and then coalescing them in a harmonic equilibrium.



Franz Kline, *Harleman*, 1960. Oil on canvas, 53 x 102 inches. Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery. © 2025 The Franz Kline Estate and Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Timothy Doyon.

Proving that unconscious memory will always find some way to express itself is a modest 21 by 16-inch oil on paper mounted on canvas: *Untitled* (1957). Anyone familiar with Kline's life and work would be tempted to see a *gestalt*, a shape very reminiscent of a chair set in a space reminiscent of a room. The lower section, creating a floor-like plane, recedes toward a multicolored wall. Is this the ghost of Elizabeth and her rocking chair partially surfacing from Kline's subconscious? Maybe. Maybe not. Kline's work is filled with mysteries we may ponder but never solve.