

# The New York Times

## Art Review

# Expressionism's Sooty Anomaly

## 'Franz Kline: Coal and Steel,' at Sidney Mishkin Gallery



Franz Kline, *Pennsylvania Landscape, 1948-49*, oil on canvas, 27 ½ x 34 inches, Private Collection, © 2012 The Franz Kline Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

By **ROBERTA SMITH**  
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[Franz Kline](#) established himself as a major Abstract Expressionist painter almost overnight. In 1950, the year he turned 40, he had the first solo show of his career, at the Charles Egan Gallery on 57th Street in Manhattan. There he unveiled the dynamic abstractions, with their jutting, intersecting beams of black embedded in dense fields of white that would earn him a place in the Abstract Expressionist pantheon and rank among the style's most emblematic motifs.

Kline was unique for more or less vaulting onto the Abstract Expressionist bandwagon just as it was reaching full speed, and for being accepted as an equal by those who had set it in motion. Its prime movers were Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still, who had spent years, if not decades, creeping up on abstraction through a thicket of largely European modernist styles.

Kline had done no such thing. Arriving in New York in 1938, he dedicated most of his energies to an Ashcan-related representational style. After getting to know de Kooning and some other artists, he began in 1946 to broach abstraction in tentative fits and starts. Then, around 1949, he realized that when enlarged, the small ink studies he had been making for years were not only nearly abstract, but they also had an imposing, built-in sense of scale.

Kline's representational period is almost an embarrassing anomaly in the annals of Abstract Expressionism. It has not become the stuff of legend, like his colleagues' confrontations with Europe. Instead it has received little attention and sometimes been ignored altogether. This oversight is partly remedied by "Franz Kline: Coal and Steel," a poignant, revelatory exhibition of some 50 works from throughout Kline's career at [the Sidney Mishkin Gallery at Baruch College](#).

The show was organized by Robert S. Mattison, a professor of art history at Lafayette College, in Easton, Pa., at [the Allentown Art Museum](#) of the Lehigh Valley in northeastern Pennsylvania, near where Kline was born, in 1910, and grew up. It has arrived in New York minus a few key works, but — with a catalog featuring a probing essay by Mr. Mattison and a shorter, more personal assessment by the art historian and critic Irving Sandler — it still brings a new artistic and emotional unity to Kline's achievement.

It has long been known that the Lehigh Valley's soot-shrouded landscape — pocked with the dark forms of coal-breaking towers and steel mills, and rived by railroad tracks, trestle bridges and speeding steam locomotives — left an indelible mark on Kline's art. Its industrial forms are visible, highly or not so highly distilled, in his mature paintings and evoked in their titles: for example, "Chief," "Caboose," "Bethlehem" and "Ingot."

But Mr. Mattison takes Kline's connection to the region beyond the titles and black-on-white forms. His essay, for example, contends that the precarious balancing acts of Kline's art from 1950 on are not simply powerful formal devices. They reflect the ups and downs of Kline's life, as well as the fortunes of the Lehigh Valley, which flourished when he was a child but declined precipitously during his adulthood, when he made frequent visits home.

The works themselves reveal how Kline's considerable talents for drawing and painting culminate in the architectonic calligraphies of his mature style. He was always a dazzling draftsman who made something of nearly every piece of paper that came his way, whether with a sharp pencil, pen and ink, or brush and ink. More important, he was almost from the start an impressive painter. Had he never made his black-and-whites, he would still be an artist worth cherishing.

The Pennsylvania landscapes and street scenes of the 1940s have an implicitly Expressionist, paint-loving originality. They feel closer to van Gogh or Soutine than to any American artist, except the 19th-century eccentrics Albert Pinkham Ryder and Ralph Blakelock — Kline's favorites among his countrymen — and possibly Marsden Hartley.

The small but panoramic "Lehigh River" (1944) consists of inspired flurries of strokes that already hint, in miniature, at the slashing and propulsive brushstroke-forms of Kline's mature style. The river, the factories huddled on its banks, the town climbing a distant hill, the train racing across the center — all are described in a variety of marks made primarily with a narrow palette knife or a paintbrush handle (which provides scratched indications of anything from weeds to house or factory windows). Equally striking is the painting's rich array of miscegenating browns, ochers, creams and oranges.

When Kline turned to color late in his career, the resulting paintings are often considered his weakest. But these early works reveal him to have been an inspired colorist and show what he might have reclaimed, had he not died of heart disease in 1962, at only 51.

In addition, some works narrow the palette to explore variations of two or three colors, as if heading for the ultimate reduction to black and white. "[Chief \(Train\)](#)" (1942), an image of a toylike locomotive that shares its title with a work from the first Egan show that is now in the Museum of Modern Art, is a little symphony in black and red.

Even better is "[PA Street \(Pennsylvania Mining Town\)](#)" (1947), a row of ramshackle houses in many shades of gray, beneath a deep-pink sky and beside a deep-blue-green street. (The slightly slumping, almost cartoonish quality of the houses can evoke [Lyonel Feininger](#) at his early best, but Mr. Mattison also points to the cheap, flimsy buildings of the region's company towns.) And "Pennsylvania Landscape" of 1947-49 renders a house, some hills, a bridge, the river and a train in robust strokes of bright, acid-to-Kelly greens offset by crucial touches of orange, brown and cream.

In 1946 Kline tied all his Pennsylvania scenes together in a 14-foot-wide mural painted for the American Legion Post 314 in Lehigh, Pa., where it remains. It is, however, present here as a very large color reproduction that is still a treat to see and possibly better than any mural produced under the auspices of the Works Project Administration.

It indicates Kline's connection to his place of origin that few of his paintings of New York match the tender bravura of his Pennsylvania scenes. They are either more realistic (more genuinely Ashcan) or marred by superficial and brittle Cubo-Futurist fracturing. And it is also strange to realize that while Kline was making some of his best Pennsylvania paintings, he was also heading toward abstraction, in works based on studio scenes and his ink studies of figures and furniture.

In the final section of the exhibition you feel the absence of some of the works reproduced in the catalog. Put another way, it becomes clear that for all that this marvelous exhibition accomplishes, it should inspire a full-dress examination of Kline's career. The last one in New York was at the Whitney Museum, in 1968. It's time.

***"Franz Kline: Coal and Steel" is on view through Thursday at the Sidney Mishkin Gallery, Baruch College, 135 East 22nd Street, Manhattan; (212) 802-2690, [baruch.cuny.edu/mishkin](http://baruch.cuny.edu/mishkin).***

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