

Learning to Love Franz Kline and Abstract Expressionism (or and least getting to know them better)

by Scott Peterson

I have to admit, Abstract Expressionism has never been my cup of tea. My modest background in art has been in black and white photography, and I'm drawn more to the lyrical landscapes of the Impressionists and the soft shadows and filtered city-light of Edward Hopper. The random splattering of Jackson Pollock and the thick, bold strokes of de Kooning have always left me cold and confused and feeling that this is something I could do even with my limited supply of drawing talent and knowledge of art.

So why is Franz Kline's *The Red Crayon* the subject of my final project? To start with, this particular canvas never fails to catch my eye when I walk by. The thick rectangle of black set off by brilliant yellow and stark white, the bold black and white stroke streaking across the top, the small patches of purple, blue, green, and orange poking out from beneath the heavy splotch of black like tears in the canvas fabric always catches my attention. I'm not really sure as to what is going on here, but its about time to find out.

The first question is how did Franz Kline become Franz Kline, Abstract Expressionist. What launched him down the career path of artist? There was little in his early life to suggest such a path. He was born in 1910 in the gritty coal mining town of Wilkes Barre, PA. His father, a bar tender, committed suicide when Kline was 7, and his mother shipped him off to the deceptively named Gerald College, which wasn't a college at all but rather a free boarding school for fatherless children. There was little in his school life to indicate any special talents in academics or art. His expertise was not in the classroom or studio but rather outside on the playing fields, where he starred in three sports with a particular aptitude for football.

Ironically, sports did have a profound though unintended impact on Kline's artistic life. As a senior, he injured his knee, requiring surgery and substantial recovery time. He turned to pen and ink sketching to fill the void, drawing Katzinjamer Kids type cartoons as well as illustrations for the school newspaper and year book. It was this "lucky accident" that launched his career as an artist.

After graduation, Kline headed east to study figurative drawing at Boston University. There, he doesn't limit his learning to the classroom or studio. The city opens whole new worlds for him. As he will do later in New York and London, he spends countless hours pouring over the collections of the cities many museums and wandering through neighborhoods, eyes wide open, sketching what he sees and perfecting his drawing skills.

After a brief stay in New York to study at the Art League, Franz moves to London and enrolls at the Heatherly School of Art. There he continues down a fairly traditional career path, creating portraits, still life's, and illustrations, and has two of his drawings published in *The Artist* magazine. The most significant thing that happens to him,

though, is that he meets his future wife, ballet dancer and artist model Elizabeth Parsons. Like Boston, Parsons opens whole new worlds for Kline in dance, music, and the theatre, though later in life develops mental problems and spends much of her later years in hospitals and mental institutions.

Kline returned to New York in 1938 and continued his career as an illustrator and figurist painter, following a fairly traditional path influenced by Rembrandt and the old masters. That path, though, bent sharply to the left when he began to hang out at the Cedar Bar with William de Kooning, Jackson Pollack, and Phillip Guston. These artists had a huge, paradigm-shifting affect on him, and soon he was filling his canvases with broad brush strokes, large patches of color, and the clotted and layered surfaces of the Abstract Expressionists.

It is virtually impossible to have any idea what is going on in *The Red Crayon* or Kline's other abstract paintings without having at least some understanding of Abstract Expressionism. The movement began in the late thirties and forties during a time of great economic and social anxiety, trauma, and insecurity. It has its roots in surrealism and the Social Realists belief that art can take on the world and expose injustice and inequalities. Abstract Expressionism, though, moves beyond the social and political to an art based on deep but universal feelings. It is greatly influenced by Freud and the collective unconscious as well as Jung and his shared arch-types. They also believed that the meaning of a painting was not limited to the surface but also included the gestures and actions of the painter. As the critic Harold Rosenberg put it, "At a certain moment, the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act - rather than a space in which to reproduce, redesign, or express an object real or imagined. What was going on the canvas was not a picture but an event." The process wasn't completely random or accidental, though. Jackson Pollack described it as more like "controlled chaos". When he poured, dribbled, and splattered paint on the canvas, he was expressing his deepest and most personal feelings, and because we all swim in the same memory pool, we can feel and understand those emotions.

Drop the idea of content and meaning and look at *The Red Crayon* as pure, distilled emotion? As soon as I posed the question, the shroud of confusion around the painting began to clear. The thick, muscular strokes, the sizzling streak of energy across the top, the bold patch of black highlighted by the yellows and whites - all these things were Franz Kline. He was energetic and physically active, bold in his thinking, compulsively intense in his commitment to art. The best way to really feel the emotion in Kline's paintings is to compare them side by side with Mark Rothko's later abstract paintings. Kline's paintings are all tangled energy and movement, while Rothko's warm, glowing colors and smooth surfaces are like ponds of calm, deep, waters.

Tragically, ironically, the health conscious, ever-exercising Kline died suddenly of heart failure in 1962 at the age of 52. He was at the peak of his career, just before Abstract Expressionism began its slow fade into Minimalism and other movements. Given his passion and energy and desire to grow and change, it would have been interesting to

see how he would have adapted to this brave new future. I just wish he could have hung around long enough for us to find out.