

Franz Kline, Red Crayon
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Kalamazoo Institute of Arts: May 2017

Introduction

The purpose of this summary is to provide information to docents at the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts (KIA) regarding Red Crayon by Franz Kline. Rather than offering an exhaustive study of the artist and his works, this is a handy two-page summary of selected facts that provides some context to this particular piece. Additional information on Kline can be found in the KIA Museum Library. Page two lists several questions to encourage further exploration of Red Crayon.

Franz Kline: Red Crayon



Date: 1959

Artist: Franz Kline, American, 1910-1962

Dimensions: canvas: 35 1/2 in. x 32 in. (90.2 x 81.3 cm)

frame: 37 x 33 1/8 x 1 3/8 in. (94 x 84.1 x 3.5 cm)

Medium: oil and crayon on canvas

Franz Kline: Education

Franz Kline (1910 – 1962) was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. He attended Boston University from 1931 to 1935 and studied painting at the Boston Art Students League. From 1936 to 1938, he enrolled at The Heatherley School of Fine Art in London and focused on traditional painting and drawing. A steady visitor to the British Museum and the National Gallery, Kline especially admired the works of Rembrandt.

Kline returned to the United States and eventually settled in New York City in 1939 where he remained throughout his life. He was a social person and a regular at the Cedar Tavern in Greenwich Village, a popular hangout for Abstract Expressionist artists. Kline was perhaps most influenced by fellow artists and bar mates, Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock.

Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s and 50s

Abstract Expressionism emerged in the United States following World War II, propelled by a loose association of painters in New York City of which Kline was a member. Barnett Newman, an artist associated with the Abstract Expressionist movement, wrote:

"We felt the moral crisis of a world in shambles, a world destroyed by a great depression and a fierce World War, and it was impossible at that time to paint the kind of paintings that we were doing—flowers, reclining nudes, and people playing the cello."¹

¹ Barnett Newman, "Response to the Reverend Thomas F. Mathews," in *Revelation, Place and Symbol (Journal of the First Congress on Religion, Architecture and the Visual Arts)*, 1969.

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At a basic level, works by Abstract Expressionists were characterized by unrecognizable subjects, indistinct shapes, and unconventional applications of paint in brilliant colors. These works seem to radiate emotion and, as Newman suggests, also depict universal truths about the human condition.

Franz Kline: Radical Artist

*“Well, look, if I paint what ‘you’ know, then that will simply bore you. If I paint what ‘I’ know, it will be boring to myself. Therefore, I paint what I don’t know.”*² Franz Kline

Kline was often characterized as the quintessential “action painter” because his black and white paintings established gestural brush strokes in Abstract Expression. His powerful forms and brushwork were intended to translate into an experience of structure and presence that connected with the viewer both emotionally and physically.

In less tangible terms, the creative process of drawing and painting was a self-transcending moment for Kline. He often referred to the “giving” rather than “telling” in his works. This may also reflect Kline’s sentiments, referenced above, about painting what he did not know. Moments of self-transcendence cannot be a premeditated. Yet, Kline was meticulous about sketching preliminary lines and contemplating color hue prior to painting.

Conclusion

Although Kline is typically characterized as an Abstract Expressionists painter, some scholars believe his work surpasses this genre. Stephen C. Foster suggests in *Franz Kline: Art and the Structure of Identity*, that art critics and historians have had difficulty assessing the degree to which Kline’s worked departed from modernism. Foster states that Kline’s individualistic style characterizes him as more of a radical artist than a mainstream modernist.

Franz Kline died of premature heart failure at age 51 in 1962. Although his artistry came to an abrupt ending, it remains the subject of study and renewed appreciation. Considered to be one of the most influential artists of the 20th Century, Kline’s sense of unresolved conflict so vividly depicted in his work continues to resonate with modern audiences.

Suggested Docent Tour Questions

- a) What kinds of emotions does this piece inspire in you?
- b) Franz Kline was a jazz aficionado and often painted while listening to music. What do you see or feel that may suggest a musical instrument, note, or cadence?
- c) Imagine you are video game designer. Based on what you see and feel, what kind of video game would you design -- action, adventure, strategy, simulation, role play, or sports?

² Quoted in Robert Creeley, “The Art of Poetry X,” *Paris Review* 44 (Fall 1968): 173-174.