



LEE KRASNER

# The Legacy of Lee Krasner

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## By Christopher Busa

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High above a street off Park Avenue, in the building that houses the Asia Society, photographs of Lee Krasner and her husband Jackson Pollock line the office of Charles C. Bergman, the Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of The Pollock-Krasner Foundation. The photographs of Krasner taken later in her life, after Pollock was dead, show a "fierce, undeluded woman" with the look of a "beanbag in repose," as Robert Hughes once described her, elaborating: "We all know the conventional picture of the art widow. She is held to be a sort of elephant keeper. For decades, in obscurity, she tends the elephant; waters it, feeds it, sweeps up behind it, schools it in the social graces, calms it when it runs amok and puts up with the trumpeting of its fellow pachyderms. Then, one day, the creature dies.

She becomes the curator of its myth, a terror to art historians and museum curators and dealers, vigilantly noting the offerings at the shrine and not forgetting a word of anything remotely critical that anyone once said, or might still have to say, about Jumbo."

Krasner's values were not the values of the late 80s. As a woman, a Jew, and an art widow, she carried a triple cross. Of her work as an artist, her teacher, Hans Hofmann said in 1937, "This is so good you would not know it was done by a woman." When Pollock was killed in an East Hampton car accident, while Krasner was away on her first trip ever to Europe, his paintings were just beginning to sell, and he and Krasner were just ceasing to be poor. Perhaps, as Barbara Rose speculates, abstract art enabled Krasner to overcome the ancient Jewish prohibition against making graven images. Inhabiting the very ghost of her mythic husband, Krasner's own inclusion in the sacred circle of first

generation abstract expressionists only occurred belatedly.

In 1981, three years before she died, Krasner drew up a will leaving her estate for the establishment of a foundation to aid "worthy and needy" artists. Today, The Pollock-Krasner Foundation is worth over 25 million dollars with assets largely in Krasner's and Pollock's paintings and drawings. In a recent interview with *Provincetown Arts*, Charles Bergman discussed Krasner's legacy.

Bergman would like to feel that The Pollock-Krasner Foundation has a special sensitivity to the emotional, as well as financial, difficulties of artists. Pollock himself wrestled with alcoholism and prolonged psychoanalysis. If Otto Rank is correct in saying that there are three types of people, normal people, neurotics, and artists, and that neurotics are simply unproductive artists, then an artist going through an unproductive phase is very prone to the frustration that can lead to an

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imbalance or illness. In the eyes of the foundation, this is hardly a stigma. Many people who apply to the foundation have problems with alcohol or drug abuse, as well as emotional or mental illness, and some grantees have used their funds for treatment. An artist could be earning a decent living and be faced suddenly with a catastrophic illness or emergency, wiping out his seemingly good income. It could be cancer or a studio fire, but AIDS is Bergman's most dramatic current example. His office receives desperate requests almost weekly. Though the illness can be so debilitating that the artist often is not able to produce, the foundation will award a grant to someone who is too sick to work with the hope that the money will be part of the rehabilitation process.

**L**ast December, he had just returned from the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, countries from which The Pollock-Krasner Foundation had never received a grant application. Bergman's purpose in making the trip was to set up a network of US and foreign diplomats, local museum officials, critics, and artists who would encourage visual artists in the three countries to apply freely and directly to the foundation, like other artists all over the world. In the USSR alone he met with over 150 artists, always proud to say that Lee Krasner was a woman of Russian-Jewish descent. Having been to Europe many times, Bergman is no novice to travel. But the rigors of this month-long trip and the difficulty of working with an interpreter, were physically exhausting. In particular, he remembers the farewell words of one artist in Leningrad: "We live in a box looking out with binoculars at an upside down society."

He also observed how strange and convoluted was the Russian way of selling art. He saw artists attempting to get money due them from the Sotheby's auction last summer, which took place in Moscow. "The Russian artists supposedly got huge amounts of money. Not a single one of them had seen a cent when I left. Sometimes art is sold through the auspices of the

Ministry of Culture or through the Union of Soviet Artists or the Cultural Foundation of the USSR. If you went to the Soviet Union as a private citizen and wanted to buy work of an artist, I don't think that artist can legally sell it to you without it going through one of these jurisdictions. In the case of Czechoslovakia there is an organization called Art Centrum where you have to get a permit and a stamp, you the artist, if you wish to sell to a foreigner, whether a private citizen or an art dealer." Bergman made it very clear to officials that the foundation he represents did not give a hoot whether the artist was official or unofficial, union or nonunion.

Bergman credits his late father, who ran three leading teaching hospitals, as the stimulation for his social and humanitarian concern, as well as an appreciation of the arts in the broadest sense. One of those hospitals, Boston's Beth Israel, had been founded by his grandfather, a philanthropist. His father was a distant cousin of Bernard Berenson. During his junior year at Harvard, Bergman traveled with his family to visit Berenson at the Villa I Tatti in Florence. Early in his life, Bergman committed himself to mobilizing leadership and resources behind causes that enrich the quality of life.

He explained, "We gave a grant to an elderly and famous artist who was lying in a nursing home. The nursing home staff did not even know that this was a great artist. He was too sick to write his own application. As a result of our grant, he received excellent geriatric care and an art therapist. This artist who was comatose in bed was able to paint again. Whether his work will ever be sold is not relevant. Whether it will ever be exhibited is not important. Our grant, in this particular case, is in respect for the contribution, the *oeuvre*, the achievement, the merit of his work over his lifetime. In the case of younger artists, who are beset by tragic illness, we hope that our money will be useful as they begin the long and painful road to recovery. We know, with AIDS, we may be giving a grant to somebody who may not be here a year or two from now, but we don't know that for sure.

Some of our grants have gone to artists who were suicidal with despair that nobody believed in them, who felt their lives were finished. I am not being melodramatic or sentimental when I say that in the private and confidential files of the foundation, we have examples of where our grants have saved the lives of artists. This does not mean for one minute that to get Pollock-Krasner grant one needs to have catastrophic emergencies. We are equally concerned about the normal vagaries of the artist's existence: time to work, money for studio rent, money for supplies and materials. These are as legitimate reasons for giving money as a devastating studio fire. I want to be very careful in emphasizing to your readers that we are not simply an emergency station where you apply when your life blows up. Not at all."

The fact that an artist is desperately hurting and critically needs money inspires the sympathy of the foundation, but if the merit isn't there, they can't help. Conversely, the world's greatest artist may apply, not show a financial need, and be rejected. Most of the interpretation of what is meant by that sparse phrase, "worthy and needy," was left to Krasner's two trusted advisors, Eugene Victor Thaw and Gerald Dickler, respectively the President and Chairman of the foundation's board. Thaw, a private art dealer respected internationally, is also a philanthropist, connoisseur, and co-author of the four-volume *catalogue raisonne* for the work of Jackson Pollock. Dickler, Krasner's attorney, had represented the estates of Stuart Davis, Georgia O'Keeffe, John Marin, and William Baziotes. He had also been a prominent lawyer in the Mark Rothko suit brought against the Marlborough Gallery and the trustees of the Rothko estate.

**B**ergman doesn't know if he would be sentimental enough to say that, since Pollock and Krasner were childless, her legacy was left metaphorically to support fellow artists who were economically or emotionally dependent. Certainly in the case of Mark Rothko, whose estate was scandalized by the manipulation of his

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dealer after his death, the issue of an artist's legacy requires special sensitivity. Rothko wrote his own epitaph in 1949, 30 years before he died: "A picture lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the observer. It dies by the same token. It is therefore a risky act to send it out into the world. How often it must be permanently impaired in the eyes of the unfeeling and the cruelty of the impotent who would extend their affliction universally."

**T**he trustees of The Pollock-Krasner Foundation, Thaw and Dickler, knew Krasner intimately and understood her priorities. They function through a consensus of their awareness of how Krasner wished the foundation to operate. "They could fulfill her mandate because they knew her priorities," Bergman said. The foundation does not support film, video, photography or crafts, although in its early days it did award a few grants in some of these areas. Overwhelmed by thousands of applications from painters, sculptors, and graphic and mixed media artists, the foundation chose to narrow its focus to these four kinds of artists, the same ones that Krasner favored.

Since its inception in April, 1985, the foundation has awarded over 300 grants worth over three million dollars. Like the smaller Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, established to aid older and mature artists, the Pollock-Krasner Foundation perpetuates many of the values of the original abstract expressionists, who lived in a time when there was a small, word of mouth, support system, much different from the current atmosphere in which many artists are obliged to become masters of self-promotion, running for president while a fellow artist handles the advertising. Even with all its money and power, the foundation retains the humanistic force of Krasner, who, an assistant to her dealer remarked, "did not forget where they came from." With her economic values formed by the Depression, the great irony, as Thaw has said, is that had Lee Krasner not been married to Jackson Pollock, with the ex-

penses and difficulties she had in her later years, she might be applying to the very foundation she created.

Bergman said he admires enormously the stamina of an artist who may have been rejected by other foundations, who may be hurt, discouraged, disconsolate, or depressed, yet will put his intimate private life in writing to seek help from the foundation. "We are not only sensitive to the confidentiality of what is said, we will not even reveal who got a Pollock-Krasner grant unless the artist gives us written permission." Their best grants, he added, have been made to artists who have come as referrals from other grantees, the result of one artist telling another to apply. "It's phenomenal," he said. "We'll give a grant and in 24 hours I'll get calls from four cities where artists have heard about the grant."

Through his work with the foundation, Bergman has come to know Krasner vicariously. He sees her through the eyes of Thaw and Dickler, as well as through two art dealers, Robert Miller and Jason McCoy, who manage the sale of Pollock's and Krasner's paintings. He notes that Jason McCoy, Jackson Pollock's nephew, was especially nurturing to Lee Krasner. McCoy, working in association with Thaw, is in charge of the Pollocks. The highly regarded Robert Miller was Krasner's dealer in her later years, and he continues to handle the foundation's Krasners.

**M**iller, who described Krasner as a "no-nonsense woman," took special trouble to search his files to provide *Provincetown Arts* with the one statement by the artist that epitomized the organic, self-enfolding quality of her work: "Painting, for me, when it really 'happens' is as miraculous as any natural phenomenon—as, say, a lettuce leaf. By 'happens,' I mean the painting in which the inner aspect of man and his outer aspects interlock. One could go on forever as to whether the paint should be thick or thin, whether to paint the woman or the square, hard-edge or soft, but after awhile such questions become a bore. They are merely problems in

esthetics, having only to do with the outer man. But the painting I have in mind transcends technique, transcends subject and moves into the realm of the inevitable—then you have the lettuce leaf."

In the foundation's recent annual report, illustrated with the work of numerous grantees, Eugene Thaw writes, "We make no critical claim for any overall level of achievement. Indeed, many of the objects and painted surfaces recorded here may well represent personal obsessions, emerging from the psyche of individual artists instead of the more prosaic search for some kind of truth understood by laymen. Certainly, for a long time now, not too many artists have consciously sought to send out into the world objects that used to be called 'beautiful.' In due course, time will reveal which, if any, of the artists whose careers were helped by Pollock-Krasner grants can be deemed masters—communicators of images which help those of us who are not artists, to understand our world more fully."

Since the inception of the foundation, Bergman has enjoyed a job that he says is the culmination of everything he could aspire to do with his life, creatively giving away money to individual artists, enriching the quality of life of people who in turn are enriching the quality of life for all of us. For Bergman, this is the ultimate privilege. "If you said to me, 'Wave a magic wand and choose any career,' it would be this." □□

*Christopher Busa is the son of the late abstract expressionist painter Peter Busa, one of the earliest grantees of The Pollock-Krasner Foundation.*