



Nevelson, Louise (1899-1988)

by Caryn E. Neumann

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Flamboyant bisexual sculptor Louise Nevelson, an American of Russian Jewish heritage, specialized in painted wooden walls and boxes that reflected cubist and pre-Columbian influences.

Nevelson was born Louise Berliawsky on September 23, 1899 in Kiev, Russia. She immigrated with her family to Rockland, Maine in 1905. In 1918, shortly after graduation from high school, Nevelson became engaged to Charles Nevelson, a wealthy New York City shipowner. They married in 1920 and had one child, Myron (Mike), who also became a sculptor.

As a young married woman in New York City, Nevelson took painting, drama, and voice classes. Although she never lost her theatrical flair, Nevelson gradually became more focused on painting. She studied painting in 1928 at the Art Students League.

In 1931, Nevelson separated from her husband and moved to Munich, Germany to study with abstract painter Hans Hofmann. Never especially maternal, she left her son with relatives. The Nevelsons divorced in 1941.

Having returned to New York in 1933, Nevelson exhibited her works for the first time that year. The small-scale, abstract works of this first stage of her career were often based on human and animal themes.

In 1937, Nevelson joined Diego Rivera to complete a series of murals for the Works Progress Administration. She also embarked on an affair with Rivera, much to the annoyance of Rivera's wife, renowned bisexual painter Frida Kahlo.

As a child, Nevelson had created artworks from wooden scraps that she picked up in her father's lumberyard. As an adult, Nevelson struggled financially and made do with whatever she could. In 1942, she introduced "found objects" into her artworks.

Nevelson's wooden constructions were made of packing crates as well as broken and discarded pieces of architectural ornamentation that she foraged from the streets near her Greenwich Village home. Working within the tradition of assemblage, she divested familiar objects of their original identity and turned them into objects within complex structures.

Nevelson typically worked on several projects simultaneously. A piece could remain unfinished for years. Nevelson would look at it, make a quick decision to add or subtract something, and then study the sculpture for a long time while listening to music.

While some of Nevelson's early wood figurative pieces were polychromed, she soon began to paint her sculptures entirely black. The solid color unified the shapes within the composition and focused attention on the work. In the early 1960s, she began using all-white and all-gold constructions as well as such materials as Plexiglas and steel.

Nevelson's signature works are the large "walls," such as *Sky Cathedral* (1958), which feature stacked boxes and crates. Beginning in 1958, she made a series of "Zags." These pieces are irregularly contoured black reliefs with cells that are filled small cubes, spheres, and other precise shapes.

In 1962, Nevelson began living with artist Diana MacKown. While most of Nevelson's biographers completely skip over her twenty-six-year-long relationship with MacKown, those who do mention it tend to accept the women's denial that their relationship was romantic. Nevelson reportedly stated, "I couldn't live with myself if I was a lesbian."

However, the reality may have been more complicated. Never especially well-off and dependent on public art commissions, Nevelson may have feared the financial consequences of being exposed as a lesbian. Moreover, MacKown threatened Nevelson's estate with a palimony claim after the sculptor died in New York City on April 17, 1988.

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