

Nevelson, Louise [née Berliawsky, Leah]

(*b* Kiev, Russia [now Ukraine], Sept 23, 1899; *d* New York, NY, April 17, 1988).

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American sculptor. In her lifetime Nevelson was considered one of the leading American sculptors and one of the most successful women artists of the post-war years. She is represented in major museum collections and was given important public commissions. Born in Kiev in 1899, Louise Nevelson immigrated to America at the age of six and grew up in Rockland, ME. Her father had a successful lumber and construction business there. With her marriage to Charles Nevelson in 1920, she moved to New York and eventually began her studies at the Art Students League where she was instructed by Kenneth Hayes Miller and Kimon Nicolaidis (1891–1938). In 1931 Nevelson travelled to Germany to meet Hans Hofmann and later studied with him in New York. In 1933 she served as an assistant to Diego Rivera on one of his New York mural projects.

Nevelson's marriage was brief, but it produced a son and helped her move to New York where she began her career. From 1935 to 1939 she taught for the Works Progress Administration at the Educational Alliance School of Art. At the same time she actively showed her work in group exhibitions. In 1941, she had a critically praised solo exhibition at the Nierendorf Gallery in New York City, though no work sold. The following year she showed her first sculptures made from found wood. She regularly exhibited her work each year for the rest of her life with the shows becoming more plentiful as her reputation expanded. In the early 1940s her work became abstract and also more monumental as she expanded her repertoire of images and forms. She studied printmaking in 1947, but sculpture remained her primary medium. Her sculpture was created from wooden debris found in the streets of the city. Around 1950 Nevelson took a crucial trip to the Yucatán to view ancient Mayan art and also visited Guatemala. The 'world of forms' and the impressive pyramids were stimulating to her art.

Works such as *Sky Cathedral* (1958; New York, MOMA) evolved out of Nevelson's interest in totemic form and image. In 1957 she began using shadow boxes, or crates, as a means to showcase assemblages she made from found objects in wood. The fact that the material was discarded was part of the transformed content of the work. She not only gave the refuse new life, she gave it new meaning in these

rigorously formal structures. The idea of shadow boxes came out of her interest in a broad range of sources, from prehistoric art to Pre-Columbian, African, and Egyptian art to store windows. The wall-scaled work became known as her signature style. The sculptural installation was usually rectangular and intended to be seen from the front and painted in a monochrome colour, often black or white, to give it unity. The colour black, in particular, seemed to lend a sombre elegance that made the work look like an altar. She constructed the individual box assemblages separately and then stacked them together. *Sky Cathedral*, for example, is composed of 38 separate box parts. She adjusted the elements as she proceeded, using her keen eye to explore the composition, as attested in several videos made of her working process.

One of the major works of the period at the end of the 1950s was *Dawn's Wedding Feast* (1959; various cols), which is now divided into 12 different public and private collections. This multi-component work created an environment of white for the famed *Sixteen Americans* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, curated by Dorothy Miller, the first curator at that museum. At the time of the exhibition, the artist was 60 years old and her work was shown alongside artists some of whom were less than half her age. The abstract wood forms each have different surface articulations, combined to make a comment on the idea of marriage as a union of disparate hanging and standing elements. The work includes chapels, attendants, the bride and groom, and several other pieces such as the wedding cake. The use of the wedding metaphor was a way of conveying hope and festivity and was also the reason for the colour white.

For most of her career Nevelson worked primarily in wood, but in her later work she also explored other materials including plastic and metal, especially in her numerous public art commissions, which enabled her to realize many of her works on a large scale. The sense of complexity and mystery, coupled with her reliance on abstraction, made her sculptures seem more acceptable than figurative work might be for public sculpture because of the lack of specific references. Her later public art included the use of Cor-Ten steel, a material with which she is often associated because of her extensive use of it. For a downtown plaza in New York City, Nevelson produced three sculptures that form *Shadows and Flags* (1978), which was installed on a small plaza renamed Louise Nevelson Plaza. Nevelson also contributed the design and arrangement of benches and plantings. One of her largest commissions was for the Bendix Corporation of America for their corporate headquarters in Southfield, MI, for which she produced three Cor-Ten and aluminium black forms—two exterior and one interior, separated by a three-storey glass wall. The largest component of this grouping, dedicated in June 1979, is a 44-foot (13.4-metre) vertical sculpture of swooping curved forms, gently cascading from a central element. She also executed the 54-foot (16.5-metre) sculpture *Sky Tree* in 1977 in San Francisco. Her innovative system of sculpture catapulted her to fame in the 1960s and 1970s, making her one of the most prominent women artists of the 20th century.

Nevelson received many awards in her lifetime, including honorary degrees and prizes, as well as being one of the first recipients of the Women's Caucus for Art Lifetime Achievement Award, given at the White House in 1979. Her work is included in many major collections in the USA and Europe.

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See also

Tapestry, §II, 6: After 1914

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External resources

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