



**GUILD
HALL**
SCHOOL

Lee Krasner

Creative Learning: Teachers' Resource

barbican



Lee Krasner in her studio in the barn, Springs, 1962. Photograph by Hans Namuth. Lee Krasner Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Using this Resource

This resource is designed to provide context for the exhibition, through a range of potential focus areas and curriculum links. It includes key questions and points for consideration to encourage engagement and activity ideas both in the gallery and beyond. It may be useful to school teachers or leaders of arts or youth groups visiting the exhibition.

You can draw from the resource to open up discussion and responses from your groups – encouraging them to explore their own thoughts, ideas, observations and interpretations about the works.

Resource created by Alison Dunne for Barbican Guildhall Creative Learning.

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Plan your Visit

Barbican Art Gallery (Level 3), Barbican Centre

30 May – 1 September 2019

Sun–Wed, 10am–6pm (Bank Holiday Mon, 12noon–6pm)

Thu–Fri, 10am–9pm (Bank Holiday Fri, 12noon–9pm)

A discounted group booking rate of £3 per student applies to all secondary and sixth form school groups of ten or more (up to age 19).

For bookings and enquiries please contact the school groups booking line.

Tel: 020 7382 7211 (Mon–Fri 10am–5pm)

Email: groups@barbican.org.uk

Free tours: please book at least two weeks in advance if you would like a free exhibition tour as part of your visit.

Introduction

Lee Krasner: Living Colour explores and celebrates the dynamic and inventive work of this key 20th century American artist.

Lee Krasner was born in New York in 1908 and died in the same city in 1984. Her Russian-Jewish parents were recent immigrants who had fled from the anti-Semitic pogroms in Russia. From childhood, Krasner knew she wanted to be an artist and later reflected, 'it [was] clear that my "subject matter" would be myself...'

Through nearly 100 works the exhibition charts a fascinating story of an ever evolving artist and her explorations of 'self' in many forms, from early portraiture, 'Little Image' paintings, collages and later large-scale abstract works.

Krasner said, 'my painting is so biographical if anyone can take the trouble to read it'. As you visit the exhibition and experience Lee Krasner's art, take the trouble to 'read' the biography within her work.

'I like a canvas to breathe and be alive. Be alive is the point.' Lee Krasner

Cross curricula links

As a complex and multi-faceted artist, it is enriching to explore Lee Krasner's work from a variety of perspectives. The following sections look at how Krasner's work can be explored across the curriculum with ideas for discussion, research and creative work.

Art and Design

This exhibition situates Lee Krasner in the midst of an exciting period in the history of art. Look closer at the historical, social and artistic context of this time.

Some of the inspirations behind Krasner's work can equally inspire your own work! Consider some of the key inspirations behind Lee Krasner's work including Cubism, Miró and Matisse and her own circle of New York artists:

Picasso and Braque (analytical cubism) – exploring tensions between flatness and three dimensionality, playing with representations of space

Matisse – bold and inventive ways of exploring form, shape and colour through cut-outs

Joan Miró – automatism, imagery of dreams and subconscious, biomorphic and organic forms

Abstract Expressionism – gestural, spontaneous, abstract style, American modernist movement (sometimes called the New York School). Look at work by other artists in Krasner's circle in New York in the 1930s and 40s onwards. Even now, most of the well-known names associated with this movement tend to be male – for example, Krasner's husband Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Robert Motherwell, Adolph Gottlieb. But take a closer look and there are many female artists who didn't always get the recognition they deserved at the time or since - for example: Mercedes Carles, Mary Abbott, Perle Fine, Elaine de Kooning (who signed her paintings with initials, as Lee Krasner also often did, so she wouldn't be judged as a woman), Helen Frankenthaler and Joan Mitchell. Other figures in Krasner's circle included collector and champion of modern art, Peggy Guggenheim and the critic and writer on art, Clement Greenberg.

'This is so good, you would not know it was done by a woman' Painter Hans Hofmann actually said this about his student Lee Krasner's art, in 1937. It is often thought that Krasner changed her name to the non-gender specific Lee (from Lena) to allow her work to be seen on its own merits and to deflect attention away from her gender. Consider the reality of attitudes towards women at this time and how this affected their careers and reputation as artists.

Music

The American Abstract Artists (AAA) group was founded in 1936 and was designed as a forum for the promotion and understanding of modern art (interestingly, it is still going today). Krasner exhibited with the group from 1939-43 and it was here that she met Piet Mondrian in 1941. Krasner and Mondrian developed a close friendship. They both loved Jazz and Boogie Woogie music and would often go out dancing together at Café Society Uptown. Mondrian's painting *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942) is a homage to this style of music.

Krasner recalled her friendship with Mondrian, 'I loved jazz and he loved jazz and we went dancing like crazy.' Mondrian told her, 'You have a very strong inner rhythm. You must never lose it.'

She said, 'I never violate an inner rhythm. I loathe to force anything. I do not force myself, ever ... I have regard for the inner voice.'

Consider the similarities between visual art and music and how both can have rhythm, structure, beat, energy and dynamic movement.

Listen to a range of music and as you do so, use colour, mark making or line to equate to musical notes, beats and rhythms. What would a noisy colour be like or a quiet line? Try experimenting.

Allow your own musical tastes to inform your creative work whether that be through drama, dance, visual art or a cross-arts fusion...

Listen to some jazz and Boogie Woogie of the 1940s and 50s from Lee Krasner's own record collection – such as Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Glenn Miller, Billie Holiday, and Duke Ellington.

barbican.org.uk/leekrasnerplaylist

Create a series of abstract drawings inspired by what you hear and create your own visual equivalents.

English

Many writers and thinkers inspired Lee Krasner and others in her circle. James Joyce employed a stream-of-consciousness technique breaking down barriers between usual rules of grammar, punctuation and tenses. He blurred the inner worlds of thoughts, the unconscious and the exterior, outside world beyond. He also created a fluidity of time in which past, present and future have the potential to move around.

Consider how Krasner's approach to her art making could be seen as a stream of consciousness and an expression of her conscious and unconscious inner life and processes. Does she find ways of breaking down boundaries between past-present-future, her inner life and the outside world in her work?

American Transcendentalism – e.g. Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson (from whose work Krasner and Pollock took painting titles). These writers explored their connection to nature and the wider universe. Consider how relating to nature and to herself as part of nature, was bound up in Krasner's way of working.

In the exhibition, in what ways do words and images interplay to create different levels of meaning? Consider Krasner's thinking behind the choice of titles she gave her works.

Create a series of visual poems or written pictures in which you express yourself in a free-way, not adhering to the usual 'rules' e.g. of tense or grammar, or perspective and representation. See what emerges from within!

How do images communicate ideas, tell stories and inspire creativity in the viewer? Use works in the exhibition as starting points for free writing, which can be further developed into narratives or short stories.

Use speaking and listening skills in discussions based on explorations of Krasner's work. Describe, explain and justify views and opinions.

History

Look further into the historical and social context of Lee Krasner's life.

American women only got the right to vote in 1920 – when Lee Krasner was 12. Consider growing up in this context and how one must have needed to work harder to be recognised and taken seriously as a female artist.

Following the Wall Street Crash of 1929, the Great Depression set in at a time when Krasner was just establishing herself as a young artist. Materials were expensive and Lee would often use cheaper conté crayons over oils and would work over and recycle old work.

The New Deal programme of reforms and government backed support was introduced by Franklin D. Roosevelt to counter poverty, increase productivity and raise moral. The Federal Art Project (FAP) was established as part of this, employing artists across the US, including Krasner, to work on a range of art projects and public commissions. She worked in the Mural Division which gave her valuable experience working on a larger scale, as well as a much needed living wage as an artist. Following on from this, the 1942 War Services Project asked Krasner to make a series of photomontages for 20 department-store window displays to advertise courses related to the war effort.

Look at Krasner's photomontages which incorporate photography, drawing, assemblage and typography (you may also wish to look at works by the Russian Constructivists who influenced her work here).

Create a series of montages in a similar vein to Krasner's, either by hand or digitally, to advertise something from contemporary life.

Jackson Pollock

Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock married in 1945 and settled in a farmhouse in Long Island. Pollock worked in the barn outside on huge canvases and she at a table, in an upstairs room in the house (was that fair?!) – where she made her ‘Little Images.’ Do you think Krasner was restricted by working in a small space or did it actually provide some of the conditions for her to truly innovate?

Consider the differences and similarities between their work and how each artist was perceived at the time. Think about how this marriage influenced the course of Krasner’s life and career – both while Pollock was alive and after his death.



Photograph of design for War Service Window Displays (original collages lost), 1942. Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner Papers, circa 1905-1984. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Reading Lee Krasner

The following focus areas look at key areas of Krasner’s life and career. These sections can be used as further starting points for student discussion and consideration and/or students’ further research and creative work.

Consider your own reactions to the works and what effect they have on you, how they make you think and feel - and why. What inspiration and ideas can you take from them for your own work?

Take a break

Lee Krasner was a versatile and skilful artist who reinvented her approach to her work many times. Krasner deliberately created these ‘breaks’ in her career in order to revise and refresh her style and technique and bring out new meanings and expression in her work. This way, her work continued to reflect her own enquiring nature and need to push herself further. Consider her changing approaches from early self-portraits through to the later huge and colourful abstractions.

Periods of productivity and flowering followed quiet, more dormant periods; building up reserves were cycles that continued throughout Krasner’s life.

Consider how Krasner’s work changes quite distinctly over time. Compare these different approaches and see which body of work you are most drawn to and why. Students could research some of her contemporaries such as Mark Rothko or Barnett Newman and see how their artistic outputs differed to Krasner’s – are they more rigid and repetitive or do they develop a more coherent body of work by sticking to a largely continuous way of working?

Question your own working processes and consider how you can challenge and breathe new life into your approach. Try different ways of working and pausing to consider new directions e.g. continuous line drawing; mark making with a range of less obvious tools e.g. sticks, feathers, combs; drawing with your opposite hand; using surprising colours or materials you wouldn’t normally choose; working on a new scale either very big or very small etc.

Edit and Evolve

Lee Krasner had a ruthless approach to her own work, often destroying and remaking as she worked. She was never afraid to explore and follow a new line of enquiry in order to seek her own truth. As a result, Krasner, doesn’t have one signature style and her work expresses a refusal to be categorised. Her work constantly evolves and shifts – containing some key elements of Abstract Expressionism such as the gestural marks, but also geometries and angles, different forms and inspirations and other personal approaches.

Be open to changing your approach, don’t get stale and stuck in your ways!



Lee Krasner, Stop and Go, c.1949, Private Collection. © The Pollock-Krasner Foundation. Image: Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.

Little Images

The ‘Little Images’ series of 31 paintings (1946-50), are her first all-over abstractions. They form a breakthrough in self-discovery and show a move away from older influences such as Cubism, towards a more personal quest for self-expression. These small pieces appear to echo ancient picture-writing systems (for example Hebrew script) and could also be seen as a personal language of symbolism – with their system of shapes, marks and gestures. Within these works, Krasner used differing techniques such as heavy impasto, very thinned down paint and carefully controlled dripped paint.

Look at ancient pictographic scripts and hieroglyphics for inspiration in your own work, using symbols and shapes such as triangles, zig-zags and spirals. Think about writing itself as an art form e.g. Chinese calligraphy, illuminated manuscripts, Concrete Poetry, Farsi shape poems.

Create your own secret alphabet for others to decipher!

Destruction and Creation

On entering her studio one day in 1953, Krasner said she looked at her work, ‘hated it all, took it down, tore everything and threw it on the floor.’ She didn’t return for a couple of weeks and said the torn drawings then ‘began to interest me and I started collaging.’ Krasner also went on to destroy and reassemble old paintings and canvases, layering a combination of her own discards with pieces of cloth, newspaper and black photographic paper, and even some discards of Pollock’s drawings. She called this approach a ‘recycling of the self in some form’ – another form of self-portrait although less traditional than the ones created earlier in her career?

Look at pieces she made in the 1950s such as *Burning Candles*, *Desert Moon* and *Bald Eagle*. Think about the potential of recycling old work, how can it be reimagined and repurposed – what can be added or taken away to give it new meaning? Consider how the process of destruction can also let in fresh creation, energy and ideas.

Krasner used old wagon wheels to make into mosaic tables – using pieces of tiles, broken glass, shells, cheap, jewellery, keys etc. stuck into the surface. Pollock (perhaps influenced by Krasner), also included objects in some of his paintings – for example gravel, pebbles, nails, buttons, coins, combs and paint tubes.

Think about how you can repurpose discarded papers, materials and other items to create your own art either in 2 or 3 dimensions.



Lee Krasner, *Burning Candles*, 1955, Collection Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York, gift of Roy R. Neuberger. © The Pollock-Krasner Foundation. © Jim Frank



Lee Krasner, *Bald Eagle*, 1955, Collection of Audrey Irmas, Los Angeles. © The Pollock-Krasner Foundation. Photograph by Jonathan Urban.



Lee Krasner, *Mosaic Table*, 1947, Private Collection. © The Pollock-Krasner Foundation/ARS, New York, licensed by Copyright Agency, 2018. Image courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.

Night Journeys

In 1956 Pollock died in a car crash. Krasner moved into the barn where he had worked and suddenly her work started to grow in scale – why do you think this shift in scale occurred at this point? e.g. was it purely due to having a larger work space or did she feel more empowered/ liberated, or something else? Suffering with insomnia, she worked at night without colour, mainly only in burnt umber – this was partly due to the fact that she didn't like working in colour under harsh artificial light. The sombre, reduced palette might also reflect the pain and loss she was experiencing.

Due to their large size, these so-called Night Journeys paintings were demanding to create for someone 1.6m tall. Paintings such as *Polar Stampede* and *The Eye is the First Circle* were created using her entire body, almost as in a dance. She would have to leap from the floor with a long-handled brush to reach the furthest areas. She called them 'physical paintings', in which a staccato rhythm is built out of a repeated 'gesture [of] thrust.'

Push yourself to work on a new scale and explore the challenges and rewards of doing so. Try using your whole body to create physical art whether that be performance based or using paint/other media.



Lee Krasner, *Polar Stampede*, 1960, The Doris and Donald Fisher Collection at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. © The Pollock-Krasner Foundation. Image courtesy Kasmin Gallery.



Lee Krasner, *Combat*, 1965, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest, 1992. © The Pollock-Krasner Foundation/ARS, New York, licensed by Copyright Agency, 2018. Image courtesy of National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.



Lee Krasner, *Portrait in Green*, 1969, The Pollock-Krasner Foundation, New York City. © The Pollock-Krasner Foundation. Image courtesy Kasmin Gallery, New York.

Hot Colour

In the 1960s colour returned to her works with crimson, hot pinks and oranges. Look at works such as *Icarus*, *Combat* and *Portrait in Green*. She started using looser lines and powerful gestures which arc, loop, sweep and tumble across the canvas, with animated or even agitated or aggressive movement.

What shapes or forms do you think you can see within these paintings? Take some time to 'read' these paintings - what do you think she was expressing? What do they evoke or symbolise for you? Freedom, liberation, personal power, self-knowledge, the exploration of self...?

Do you think this new use of vibrant colour and liberated line symbolised something? Was Lee moving into a new reality, away from a mourning period or indeed from being in the shadow of Pollock?

Experiment with 'hot' and 'noisy' colours and gestures in your own work!

Back to Nature

Krasner was always receptive and alert to the world around her and had a strong sense of connectedness to nature. Can you see this filter through her work?

She constantly collected natural objects such as stones, drift wood and shells to draw artistic inspiration from. Throughout her life, she used the word 'organic' to describe her art.

In the 1970s, Krasner began to paint more organic forms, inspired by natural forms in nature. For example, *Palingenesis*, a title that is a Greek term for 'rebirth'. Consider Krasner's words, 'evolution, growth and change go on. Change is life.'

Try taking a walk and collect a number of natural objects to use as starting points for creative responses.



Lee Krasner, *Palingenesis*, 1971, Pollock-Krasner Foundation, New York. © The Pollock-Krasner Foundation. Image courtesy Kasmin Gallery, New York.

Past, Present, Future

In the 70s she also did more collages – e.g. *Past Continuous*, *Present Conditional* and *Future Indicative*. Why do you think Krasner gives these paintings titles of grammatical tenses?

In these works, Krasner again explores destruction, revision and creation – slicing through her old anatomical and life drawings and juxtaposing them in new dynamic compositions. This time she chose to destroy the past more precisely with scissors or a knife (rather than tearing as she did previously) before reconfiguring it again in the present. Through these works, she seems to create her own version of her personal and artistic history and plays with and challenges concepts of time.

As Krasner herself said, 'I am never free of the past, I believe in continuity. I have made it crystal clear that the past is part of the present which becomes part of the future.'

Reflect on Krasner's entwining of herself; the past, present and future; natural environment and surroundings; her art itself.



Lee Krasner, *Future Indicative*, 1977, Private Collection. © The Pollock-Krasner Foundation. Image courtesy of Sotheby's, 2018.

Multiple Selves

Lee Krasner was fascinated by writers who explored the inner worlds and unique perspectives of their characters – for example Edgar Allan Poe and French writer, Arthur Rimbaud. Krasner had the words from a poem by Rimbaud written across her studio wall. Rimbaud was fascinated by psychoanalysis and believed that the concept of a single fixed self was a fiction that we each have multiple selves. Do you think this resonated with Krasner and her constant artistic reinvention and change of 'voice'? Consider too how Lee Krasner often just used her initials on works and changed her name several times throughout her life including to 'Lenore' as a young woman (inspired by a character called Lenore in Poe's writing?). Did these names allow another reinvention, shift in identity or expression of a different self?

Consider other well-known figures either contemporary or historical, who express multiple selves and reinvent themselves in different ways.

Find out more about Lee Krasner:

Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center

<https://www.stonybrook.edu/commcms/pkhouse/>

A to Z of Lee Krasner

Abstract/Abstract Expressionism

Biography

Collage

Destruction and Creation

Edit and Evolve

Feminism

Gesture

Hot Colour

Invent/reinvent

Jazz Boogie Woogie

Krasner and Pollock

Little Images

Modern/Modernism

New York

Organic/Nature

Photomontage

Question

Rhythm

Self

Time - past, present, continuous

Unconscious/conscious mind

Voice

Writers and Writing

Credits: Barbican Guildhall Creative Learning

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