

# Franz Kline In Provincetown

by April Kingsley

Enshrouding myths swirl around Franz Kline with the inevitability of fog rolling in across the dunes of Provincetown, making it as difficult to find the real man amid the stories as it is to find the runway at the airport in the cold, thick mist. Being one of the hard-living heroes of the pioneering first generation of Abstract Expressionist painters, and dying young - he was only 51 years old at his death shortly before his birthday in 1962 - he had a relatively brief period as a mature, successful painter. Thus he was linked in many people's minds with Van Gogh, Pollock and Lautrec - a mythic, tragi-romantic figure whose career was cut short of fulfillment. His heavy-drinking, partying, bar-room lifestyle, his colorful friends and bohemian cohorts, and his hilariously discursive story-telling all combined to add lustre to this image. As one would expect, he is firmly embedded in just about everybody's concept of the excitement of Provincetown as an art colony in the fifties.

Bill Ward, who published the short-lived *Provincetown Review* in those years, gives the proto-typical picture in the following description quoted by Peter Manso in his recent biography of Norman Mailer:

How do you characterize a place? P-Town was a lark. The mixture of people, the painters, the writers, the hippies. Kline, Rothko, Hofmann, Edwin O'Connor in Wellfleet, Kevin McCarthy... Reggie Cabral's A-House, one of the places to go for your cocktail hour since Reggie had shows there - Gerry Mulligan, Mose Allison,

Eartha Kitt, they'd all be around... After work there'd be parties, mostly bring-your-own, except for the O'Haras, who'd throw big bashes up on their hill, and John Frank, who threw fantastic parties too, let-it-all-hang-out-type parties...

The cast of peripheral characters changes, but the core group always features Kline. In Fred McDarrah's *The Artist's World*, for example, Kline figures centrally in the photographs of the Motta Field softball games. Such deathless captions as "Home run champ Franz Kline belts one," and "Third baseman (Alex) Katz tries to stop the champ (Kline)" indicate the extent to which Kline's antics made the early games so much fun.

By all accounts, Kline would seem to have been a ubiquitous presence in Provincetown during the summer season from the mid-fifties until his death. Some people think he was here in the forties and early fifties as well, and that he studied here then with Henry Hensche, but he actually did that way back in 1931 or 1932. In fact, he was instrumental in getting Hensche to Boston to teach at the Boston Art Students League in 1932, where he continued to study with him. A nearly month-long Indian Summer visit in 1956 with Al Leslie in Leslie's Model A or Model T pick-up truck is confirmed by Tony VEVERS, but no one seems to be clear about when he was here in 1957, 1958, and 1959. Though he was in East Hampton part of '57 and '58, he was here quite a bit in 1959. Most people's imagery to the contrary, it doesn't actually seem that Kline spent extended periods of time in Provincetown before he

bought his house at 15 Cottage Street in April 1960. Even after that he seems to have restlessly come and gone, instead of settling in for the summers the way most artists who could afford to did. "He would come up and spend some time in the spring," relates Reggie Cabral, "then he'd go back to New York. He was like a person always on the move, always on the go. He was not the kind of person who'd come down Memorial Day and say he was gonna stay through Labor Day."

Just as his infectious laughter turned every story he told into side-splitting merriment even though you might not have actually caught what was so funny, Kline's presence apparently had such vividness, so much spirit, that he gave the impression of having been on the scene all the time, at every party, game, and bar in town, and it continues to loom disproportionately large. Even in 1961, one of the two summers he was supposed to have spent here, he wrote to his old pal, the painter Herman Somberg about getting the keys to the Cottage Street studio from Johnny Oliver who lived next door, or from the Bultmans (Jeanne and Fritz), for his stay there later in June, saying he's sorry he won't be there to see Herman. He mentions that he "came up for Tom Sawyer's funeral and (has) to fly back to-day," adding that "if Bob Bolt [sic - Bollt was the collector with whom he had traded a painting for a silver Ferrari the previous year.] comes let him stay in the house since its only a couple days - over the 4th," which meant he wasn't going to be back until sometime later in July at the earliest. Kline seems to have liked off-season periods at least as much, if not more than mid-summer's peak.

Truth be told, Kline seems to have come to Provincetown as much to work as to play. Off-season and unpredictable visits enabled him to do as much of both as he wanted. The man who said the following to Frank O'Hara was a confirmed city-person:

Hell, half the world wants to be like Thoreau at Walden worrying about the noise of traffic on the way to Boston; the other half uses up their lives being part of that noise. I like the second half. (From "Franz Kline Talking")

Kline wasn't here primarily for the dunes or the light, the sun or the surf, though he enjoyed them. He liked the cosmopolitan quality of Provincetown which seemed to have a direct pipeline to 8th Street: Greenwich Village with clam sauce, as one wit said. He liked being able to stroll out of the studio after a long and lonely day's work the way he did in New York and go into a bar where he could drink as well as eat. The Mayflower or Cookies' Tap, The Old Colony and the Atlantic House were his favorite hang outs. He liked to go where he could listen to fishermen talk about the day's catch, or writers talk about politics and other writers, where his shaggy dog stories would be appreciated by the locals and his shaggy good looks would attract the ladies. Kline didn't like incessant art talk; he liked good stories and being among street-wise, salt-of-the-earth, drinking men who took him away from his painting problems. As John Frank puts it: "After a full day in the studio, the last thing he wanted to deal with was his own esthetic or his own development, or anybody else's for that matter. You just get burned out with that and want to deal with something else."

Kline was wrestling with color in those years, and it was a desperate struggle. "You can't paint a black and white picture in color," as Budd Hopkins says, but that was somehow what people expected him to do. Renewed contact with his first painting teacher Henry Hensche, might have been of some subliminal help. They had long talks at the A-House, among other places, Kline trying to convince his old teacher of abstraction's merits. (Kline had come to the A-House in the first place because he wanted to see the decorative paintings Hensche had done there for Reggie Cabral. He also knew



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which studios Pollock had painted in, and was fond of pointing them out to friends.) But some of Hensche's dicta may have, in turn, regained relevance for Kline in this time of need. For instance: "When you think in color you discover that every change in the shape of a form isn't just a value change—a change in black and white—it's a color change," as he stated in an article on his teaching methods in the March 1977 issue of *American Arts*. Hensche taught his students to see the world as a changing mosaic of color units and to paint them as simply as possible in blocks of roughly applied pigment. A brick would suffice as subject, its squarish form filling the picture space. As George North Morris noted in a *New Beacon* article of August 16, 1961 on Hensche's Cape School of Art, the "kind of impact in the stark simplicity of his present students' still life studies...is not unlike the effect of a Kline abstraction."

Time and again a simple square or rectangle occupies Kline's picture space. Its sources, already multiple—Mondrian and Malevich, Albers and Hofmann, perhaps; doors, chair backs, baseball diamonds, football fields, and the simple demarcation of a pictorial field—may be expanded here by another—a brick—and no one would find it more amusing than Kline himself, who adored *Krazy Kat*, to see the brick thrown into the picture again in this way. In "Scudera" (1961), his last picture, such a form floats dramatically heavenward in a richly colored field of deep blues and reds like an abstract Ascension. Both versions of "Henry H" painted in 1959-60 feature large vertical rectangular units, fully worked out as color, filling the field into which they are locked by "H" structures. "Sawyer" and "King Oliver," also associated by title with Provincetown, have similar compositions. Though formed very differently, "Provincetown II" (1959), with its dark blues and grassy greens, and "Orleans" (1958), with its bony elbow of black jutting out into a sea of white, relate to the Cape in obvious coloristic and formal ways, as well as by title.

John Frank, Elise Asher, Stanley Kunitz, Reggie Cabral and others have stressed how many small paintings on paper and collages they saw Kline doing in the Cottage Street studio in those last two years—1960 and 1961. They feel that he was working through his problems with color on this smaller scale so that he could take something he felt sure about to the canvas. Frank says that when Kline was about to go out for the evening he would go through the studies, stacking up the ones he wanted to keep in a little pile. "He was looking for that special thing, the one that worked," Frank says. "Some of them had it and some didn't and the ones that didn't he got rid of. He was very meticulous about that. He did destroy a substantial amount of his work. He was looking for that little piece of magic."

Though he always had huge pieces of double-sized Belgian linen pinned to his painting wall, Fielding Dawson is one of the few to see him working on a large picture in Provincetown. Dawson, who was a more or less continual presence in Kline's life after studying with him in July 1952 at Black Mountain College, describes him doing so in his *Emotional Memoir of Franz Kline*: "In 1959 and 1960 he told me he was having trouble covering large areas; he also said he couldn't seem to do the one that would knock him out. Again and again, in Provincetown he went at it, and a perfect example of his going at it, to it, and into it happened in 1960, in a metaphor." Kline was struggling with the painting, getting nowhere, when he suddenly noticed a door that his carpenter friend Tom Sawyer had built in the newly-renovated studio. Kline changed the picture midstream, later naming it "Sawyer." As Dawson describes, the "saw-er" Sawyer's door was the way into the painting, once Kline saw it ("I saw yer"). One might add to this mix of associations the fact that Kenneth Sawyer wrote the essay for the catalogue of the 1960 Venice Biennale, from which Kline had just returned as co-first prizewinner (with Fautrier) the summer he made this breakthrough. Kline relished such



"Sawyer"

punning confluences of people and places when titling. "King Oliver" was undoubtedly named for the great jazz trumpeter as well as for Johnny Oliver, the next-door neighbor on Cottage Street who was his all-around handy man, caretaker and drinking buddy. "Barefoot" Graham, a Robert Mitchum-handsome, hard-drinking writer often joined these two on the row of antique rocking chairs in front of the TV in Kline's living room, but he apparently never achieved immortalization in a picture title. And just who besides Oliver in this group was responsible for painting Kline's newly-renovated house yellow ochre when Kline had only asked for an off-white isn't certain, but on seeing the mustardy result the horrified artist said he hadn't wanted it *that* far off, and quickly paid them to completely repaint it plain white.

Certainly not adverse to the company of artists, Kline enjoyed dinners at the Bultmans', the Vevers' and the Howard Kanowitz', among others, often staying on into the wee hours sipping his beer and telling stories, just as he did at after-hours parties up in Tascha-land. He never seemed to want the nights to end. Stanley Kunitz recalls a typical Kline episode:

It was when we were still in the middle of town at Blanche Lazzell's place. Fifty-seven, I believe it was, after dinner, about ten o'clock or eleven. There was a knock at the door. We open the door and there is Franz totting a case of beer, and a big fellow loom over him carrying a case of beer. Franz says "Here. Here's Charles Olson." As if to say, here, he's yours. Olson's a poet and we're both contemporaries, but we'd never met. The two of them were loaded and Franz was in rare form, and we're sitting around this little room, which was the room where we slept too. Both of them are copious beer drinkers and Franz is going off on a riff that seems endless. This monologue, which went on for hours and hours until dawn, was consumed with one story that had to do with the roofing of the house in Pennsylvania and a baseball team and a dog, each of which had something to do with the other, and all the stories ran into each other. He'd hardly finish one when he'd start another one, and you never knew whether he was still talking about the dog or about the roof, but it was the same endless story - and it was hilarious! And he thought so the most. He says, "You want to talk about poetry," but he never let us talk. He had the floor all this time. Meanwhile, Charles who had opened his mouth at the first when he said "Hello" and how glad he was to meet me, never had a chance to speak again. The night wore on and wore on and around towards dawn Franz was still spouting forth these anecdotes of his childhood. They were getting down to the end of that beer and Charles had to go to the bathroom. He got up and suddenly his

eyes glazed over and he fell flat on his face, on the floor, right down just like that, and Franz, who was in the middle of a story didn't pause for a word. He finished the story, got up from his chair, and went over to Charles lying face down on the floor, put his foot on his neck and said, "And so another Indian bit the dust."

Kline's riffs or story chains might go on for six hours or longer, each sparked by an association with the last, but often ending where he'd begun so many hours before. "It was like a collage," explains Budd Hopkins, "he'd tell a story and then a piece of it would turn up in the next story. He would glue together all these crazy fragments of jokes and relate them back to the joke he'd started the evening with, and they just got funnier as the night went on." Trouble was, they were next to impossible to recall the next day. What remained was a sense of warmth and comradeship, of being on the inside, that was a little like being loved. And in return, he was loved.

Kline died on May 13th 1962. He had been too sick that year to make his customary early spring trip. Hopkins and Herman Somberg went into the studio at Elizabeth Zogbaum's request to make an inventory in early July. Hopkins relates:

We came in and there was the absolute sense that no one had been there since the fall. He had evidently been up there in November. The studio was set up to paint, as if he'd just stepped out. There was no sense of anything packed up or put away. He had some blank canvases tacked up on two different painting walls. There was paint which had dried up in some open pans, brushes sticking in the paint. There were a couple of stacks of drawings, some finished, some unfinished on the table which we listed for Betsy and numbered in pencil on the back. Franz's bathrobe was hanging up on a nail near the bed, which was unmade, the covers thrown back, and there were bedroom slippers next to the bed. I remember in the bathrobe pocket or in a pair of pants he had hanging next to the bathrobe, there were some bills from Land's End. The absolute sense of it was, not of somebody having gone away for the season and closed up the house, but of somebody who was going to be back in a half an hour to resume work. That was what was so touching about it. There was an ash tray next to the bed with cigarette butts in it and on the wall nearby he had a little self-portrait, an early drawing, plainly framed. Everything had the sense that he had just strolled out of the studio and simply disappeared. The implication was somehow an ongoing thing, not an end to anything.

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