

In a nutshell: Alice Neel's Life

Artist Alice Neel was born on January 28, 1900 in Pennsylvania (Carr 5). She would soon become known around the world as a great American artist. When time came for Neel to decide which art school she would attend she chose Philadelphia School of Design for Women over the more prestigious Pennsylvania Academy because she felt it gave her more freedom (Harris 3). During school Neel remembers admiring one teacher, Paula Balano, who taught portrait drawing in charcoal (Harris 3). Thusly her interest in portraiture was sparked.

After school Neel married and moved to Cuba where "...she painted the poor and members of her own immediate family. Her profound identification with people trapped by poverty and by the debilitating illness of old age was already dictating her choice of subject matter..." (Harris 4). During her earlier work Neel would use dark colors and heavy brushstrokes on her paintings (Carr). After about a year Neel and her firstborn child moved back to America. Soon the family settled in New York (Harris 4).

Right before the great depression in 1927 Neel's child died from diphtheria (Harris 4). During this time Neel's style became flat and bold (Hope 274). Slowly her marriage began to fall apart and Neel suffered a nervous breakdown. Her depression caused her to attempt suicide and she was hospitalized. This caused

her husband to leave with their second born child (Harris 4). Neel continued to paint and within time was better.

Her next relationship was with a dope addicted sailor named Kenneth Doolittle (Castle 2). Doolittle became jealous of a friendship between Neel and John Rothschild and destroyed sixty canvases and about three hundred watercolor drawings in 1934 (Castle 2 and Harris 4). This loss devastated Neel. Some she was able to recover but most was lost forever. Eventually Neel had two sons, Richard born 1939 and Hartley born 1941. By 1941 her pictures still contained friends, family, the poor, the black community and urban landscapes (Harris 5). "All of her lovers, children and their spouses and children have been recorded by Neel, in sober colors and on small canvases until the 1960's, on larger canvases and in brighter colors afterwards as her fortunes changed," (Harris 4).

Neel was not a well known artist until the 1960's. During the time up until her recognition her friend Rothschild would buy her pictures and arranger for some of his friends to be painted (Harris 5). "She never altered her style to make her art more palatable." She painted to satisfy herself (Harris 5). It is believed that "...it must have been her own stubborn belief in her work that kept her going despite minimal critical attention and rare sales," (Harris 5). Because she chose to paint people she new, random people, fellow artists etc. it was "Not surprising, many of her sitters cannot afford to buy their portrait and many of her admirers do not seem to want to live with these strongly felt images of another human being who is not a relative or friend," (Harris 6). These images appear so strong

because Neel doesn't paint for likeness she paints to capture the essence of a human being.

Moving into the light: Neel's Work in Portraiture

Finally in 1962 Neel was awarded the Longview Foundation Prize for one of her portraits. During the same year a lengthy article was written about her in *Art News* and she began to show with the Graham Gallery regularly (Harris 5). "Energized by new personal freedom, new friends, new attention to her work—including several shows at the Graham Gallery—a new, larger apartment, and perhaps psychotherapy, which she began in 1958, Neel's work showed a new expansiveness," (Carr 11). Bold bright colors began to characterize her work, but she kept the basic desire to explore human nature. She also used innovative composition and freer brushwork (Carr 11). Neel's subjects still include "...people she has met in the course of her daily existence for the past fifty years and whose physical attributes and personalities she has found intriguing and visually appealing," (Harris 6)

Neel has made a name for herself as a portraitist but in some ways she defies normal portraiture. Most portraits surround the sitter with symbols and items that help describe the sitter. Neel, however, paints her sitters in her own house and therefore the sitters in her portraits are not surrounded by their own possessions and reflections of their tastes and interests (Harris 6). Another way that Neel breaks from tradition is that she does not expect the subject to buy their portraits (Harris). Most conventional or historic portrait work has been

commissioned often by the sitter, but Neel has no intention of the sitter buying the portrait for which they pose.

Neel is believed to have the "...ability to render personality through simple details—the tilt of the head, the placement of a limb, the expression, and the color of costume," (Carr). She uses the placement of the arms to show something about the sitter's mood or manner (Carr 11). In her portrait *Sherry Speeth* she portrays his energy through long gesturing hands and animated facial features. Also, in *The Family* she makes the fathers leg appear to be wiggling nervously which gives you a feeling about the person (Hope 280).

Neel's work shows that close attention is paid to the face while other aspects of the painting may appear unfinished. "Neel's signature style still seems contemporary: open and bright, with brushwork that gives the impression of a spontaneous sketch and dispels any whiff of academic realism," (Silberman 519). In her portrait *Andy Warhol* she pays close attention to the face, making eyes closed to give the appearance that he is drawn inward (Silberman 519). Yet, the knee in the piece looks as if it were forgotten. Neel was more interested in gathering the essence of the person than in detail.

Neel once stated, "I love people who are ruined by the city, psychologically and every other way. They're under this terrible strain that life imposes. I love to show the results of that," (Miller 124). Neel was not interested in the appearance of the person; it was their spirit that interested her. "Her penetrating vision often exposed the sitters' underlying anxieties and aspects of their identities that were otherwise obscured by surface finery like their clothing

or social standing. While at times this resulted in less than flattering portrayals, Neel insisted that it was not her intent to ‘take any virtue away from my subjects. I just show them scarred by life as we all are,’” (Bauer 393).

More than just a painting

As well as capturing the essence of a person, Neel also liked to make a statement with her pieces. In 1959 she painted two neighborhood girls from the Spanish Harlem titled *Two Girls (Spanish Harlem)* that was one of the first signs of multiculturalism. Neel also painted famous critics like Frank O’Hara and Meyer Shapiro. The gesture of painting critics was believed to advance Neel because they would be able to set up shows for her or write articles on her. Another piece, *Faith Ringgold* shown to the left was important because it depicted the switch from black being thought of as skin color to African American as an ethnicity.

Alice Neel lived a hard yet amazing life. At the age of 84 she passed away in 1984. She went through so much in her life. Not only personally but within the United States as well: WWI, WWII, The Woman’s Movement, The Vietnam War, and the Great Depression. She went through it all and was still able to pursue her life long dream of being an artist. I think what is best is that through all the changes she stayed true to herself and what she wanted to paint. She was an individual until the very end.