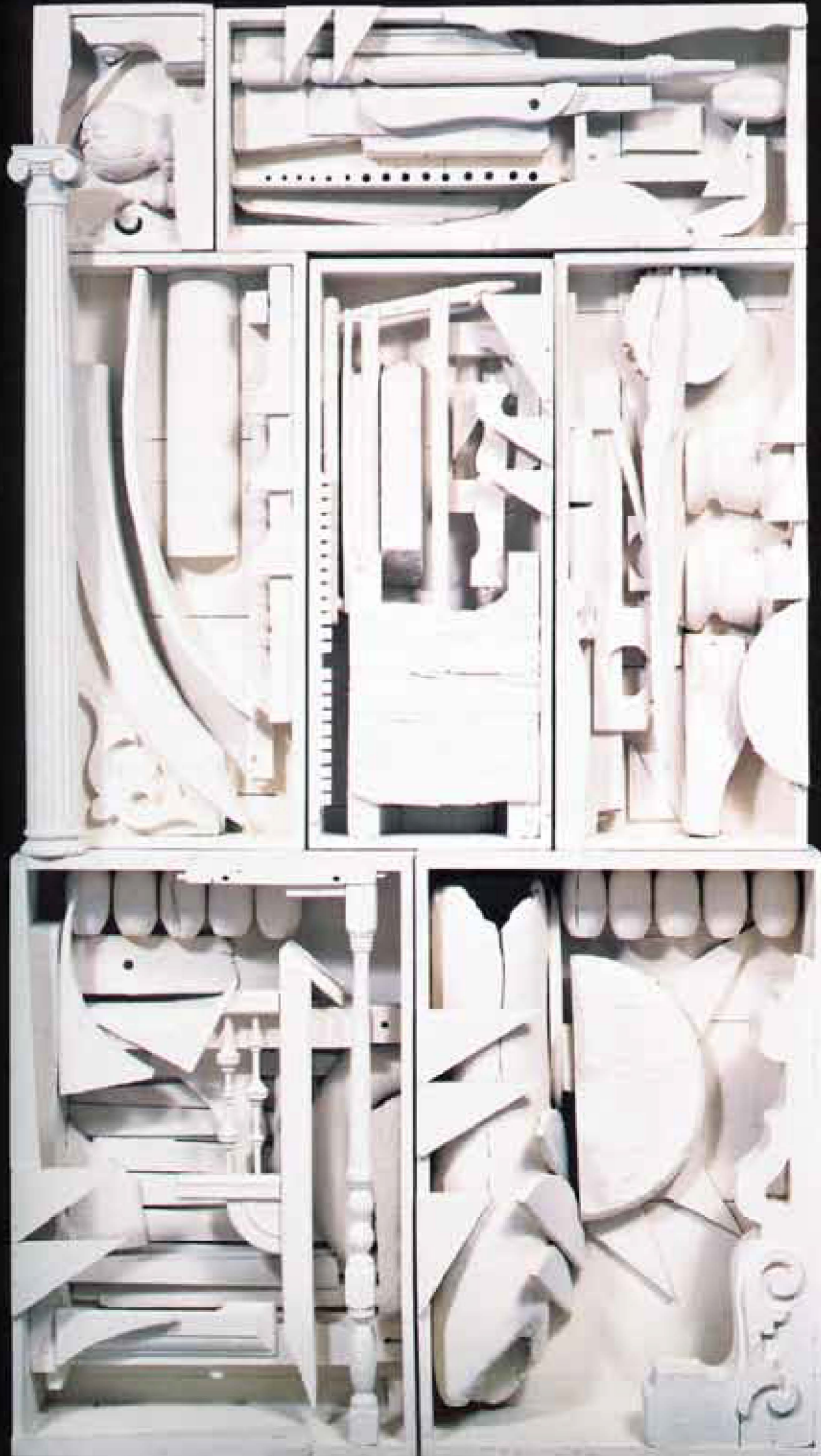


Renowned for her wood sculptures, **LOUISE NEVELSON** didn't achieve art world fame until she was nearly 60. By Hilarie M. Sheets



Louise Nevelson's *Dawn's Wedding Chapel*, 1959, in white-painted wood, is almost eight feet tall. It sold at auction in 1989 for \$253,000, still a record for the artist.

LOUISE NEVELSON'S INDOMITABLE PRESENCE, enhanced by superabundant false eyelashes and flamboyant costumes, and her monumental monochromatic sculptures created the impression that she arrived on the art scene full-blown. Indeed, the grande dame of installation art encouraged that idea through stories like the one relating her response, at age 9, to a query about what she wanted to do when she grew up. "I'm going to be an artist," she answered, then corrected herself, "No, I want to be a sculptor. I don't want color to help me."

In truth, the career trajectory followed by Nevelson, who didn't receive wide acclaim until she was close to 60, was not nearly so direct. Born Leah Berliawsky in Ukraine in 1899, she emigrated with her family in 1905 to Rockland, Maine, where her foreign clothes, as well as her Jewishness, marked her as an outsider. She married Charles Nevelson, a partner in a shipping business, in 1920, and had a child, Myron. But she found her role as bourgeois matron in New York City and its suburbs claustrophobic and ultimately abandoned married life.

Leaving her son with her parents, Nevelson went to Munich for several months in 1931 to study Cubism with Hans Hofmann, whose signature cube would become the container and building block of

her art. After trying her hand at painting, sculpture and drawing in the 1930s, Nevelson began making assemblages using wood fragments she scavenged from the streets of New York—broken furniture, banisters, crates, rackets. Several shows of these tabletop constructions and abstracted figures at the Nierendorf Gallery in the 1940s generated some notice but few sales. It wasn't until her work grew to architectural proportions, in the 1950s, with her found objects entombed in grids of stacked rectilinear boxes and fields of black spray paint, that Nevelson found broad critical and commercial success.

The Museum of Modern Art acquired one of Nevelson's "Sky Cathedral" walls in 1958 at a show at Grand Central Moderns and invited her to participate in its 1959 exhibition "Sixteen Americans." Her contribution to the exhibition was *Dawn's Wedding Feast*: a complete room, her first white installation, embedded with the story of her failed marriage and rebirth as an artist.

Arne Glimcher encountered

artist dossier

Nevelson's work at MoMA as an art student. "It was like nothing I had ever seen," he says. "She was the first environmental artist this country produced, and her influence is felt every day in Chelsea." When Glimcher opened Pace Gallery in Boston, in 1960, he was determined to exhibit Nevelson. In 1961 he convinced Martha Jackson, her dealer at the time, to give him a small show and spent money he didn't have to fly Nevelson to the opening.

Glimcher's gamble paid off: He sold one of the artist's "Sky Cathedral" pieces for \$3,000, by far his largest sale to that point, and when he moved Pace to New York two years later, he persuaded Nevelson to leave Sidney Janis and sign on with him. "From then on, the snowball was rolling," he says, adding that the artist's first show at his New York gallery sold out. Her next, of metal sculptures, was bought up by museums—the largest piece going to the Modern—and her market remained consistently strong until she died, in 1988.

After Nevelson's death, her assistant, Diana MacKown, sued the artist's son, claiming certain pieces in the estate were hers. Making matters worse, the government appraised Nevelson's personal collection of her works at a very high value, and the estate couldn't pay the taxes. "Everything shut down for 10 years," Glimcher says. "There were no significant shows. Her son couldn't sell anything. In this art world, memory is about two weeks old. A whole generation doesn't know who she is."

That's about to change. Last summer, PaceWildenstein teamed up with Galerie Gmurzynska, in Zurich, and Galleria Gio Marconi, in Milan, to buy Nevelson's estate from her son. "We thought of Nevelson as someone who's greatly undervalued," says Gmurzynska's Mathias Rastorfer. "And since our purchase, an avalanche of interest has been triggered." At Art Basel in Miami last December, Rastorfer paired some 20 reliefs by Nevelson with the same number by Kurt Schwitters, who was an important influence on

her. Nevelson's work sold out in 24 hours, her midsize "door" pieces from the 1970s going for around \$200,000 and her small wood collages for \$15,000 to \$30,000.

Nevelson's auction record, set in 1989 by *Dawn's Wedding Chapel I*, remains a relatively modest \$253,000. Rastorfer, however, believes the piece would fetch a very different price if it were to come up today. In fact, PaceWildenstein recently sold a large "Sky Cathedral" wall from 1959 for

From the Files

- The auction record for Nevelson is \$253,000, paid in 1989 for *Dawn's Wedding Chapel I*, 1959.
- In 1931, Nevelson studied Cubism with Hans Hofmann in Munich.
- In the early 1930s, Nevelson assisted Diego Rivera with the murals he was creating in New York City for Rockefeller Center.
- Nevelson represented America in the 1962 Venice Biennale.
- In 1963 the fledgling dealer Arne Glimcher convinced Nevelson to leave Sidney Janis and join Pace. She introduced Glimcher to Mark Rothko and Ad Reinhardt, among other artists he later represented.
- The high-water mark for Nevelson's work sold privately is \$2 million, paid for a 1959 "Sky Cathedral" wall.
- Collectors of Nevelson's works include Reed Krakoff, Arnold Scassi, Barbara Lee Diamondstein-Spielvogel and Arthur and Carol Goldberg.



\$2 million. "This market is driven to a large degree by what is actively shown and where there is scholarship at work," says Rastorfer. Nevelson is finally getting the required exposure with the first major museum shows of her works since the 1980s: a full-scale retrospective, including her last unpainted collages, never before shown, opening this spring at the Museo Arte Contemporanea in Rome, and a traveling show, starting at the Jewish Museum in New York in May and moving on to the De Young, in San Francisco.

Robert Looker of Sotheby's believes the Nevelson market is seeing a rebirth. He cites the success at last May's sales of Nevelson's *Dawn's Landscape XXV*, 1975, which sold for \$180,000, far in excess of its \$60,000-to-\$80,000 estimate. "If that wonderful white-painted construction could do as well as

it did, I foresee a renewed interest in bringing more significant works to auction," he says. "With many female artists, the prices from 1999 onward have been steadily increasing." Looker equates Nevelson with Lee Bontecou, Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse: "All these great sculptors that were overlooked are finally achieving the recognition they've deserved." ■



Clockwise from top: Louise Nevelson, 1980: *Untitled*, 1961: *Sky Cathedral - Moon Garden + One*, 1957-60: *Dawn's Wedding Feast* in MoMA's 1959 show "Sixteen Americans."