

# INTRODUCTION

**“My work is the mirror of my consciousness.”**

—Louise Nevelson, 1974. Barbaralee Diamonstein, “Louise Nevelson at 75 ‘I’ve Never Yet Stopped Digging Daily for What Life Is All About,’” *Art News* (October 1974)

**W**ho is the woman on the cover of this book? A Russian princess? A gypsy queen? No. She is Louise Nevelson, or “Mrs. N,” as she was known in her downtown neighborhood in New York City. (And her royal residence, *Mrs. N’s Palace*, is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.)

During her long life, which stretched from 1899 to 1988, Nevelson was considered to be one of the greatest women artists of the twentieth century and, along with David Smith, Isamu Noguchi, and Alexander Calder, one of the four greatest American sculptors. For twenty-five years, from the time she began to exhibit her work, critics praised her art but she sold almost nothing. Then in 1958, at age fifty-nine, she hit the big time. And during the next twenty-eight years of non-stop work she churned out thousands of sculptures, collages, drawings, and prints, and she became a star. She “changed the way we look at things” wrote Hilton Kramer, chief art critic of *The New York Times*.<sup>1</sup> No matter the fame she earned and the attention she attracted, she was always happiest in her studio. Her indefatigable energy was poured into her work.

I met with Louise Nevelson a number of times in 1976 and 1977, as she was the subject of my doctoral dissertation in art history from the City University of New York. I knew a fair bit about the New York scene, so I thought I was well equipped to write about Nevelson, who had gone to the same art school I

had—the Art Students League. At our first meeting in 1976, Nevelson told me that my task would be to show to the world that—after Picasso—she was the most important artist of the twentieth century. She loved to talk about herself and was remarkably open with me. I concluded that she was grandiose and self-centered—a classic narcissist. We met again in 1979 when I was writing five catalogue essays for her forthcoming exhibition at the Whitney Museum, *Atmosphere and Environments*.

I continued to be fascinated by her work, especially by the trajectory she had traversed before arriving at her signature style in the late 1950s—walls of black boxes, creating both an atmosphere and an environment. She had become the ground-breaking and unique artist whose sculpted environments started a tsunami that is still ongoing. But now it is called installation art.

By the time I met her in 1976, she had also become famous, “the doyenne of American artists.”<sup>2</sup> Lightbulbs flashed when she walked into a room. Reporters gathered around her ready to report her every move, pithy remarks, and controversial opinions (on everything from the joys of “freelance sex” to the perils of motherhood and marriage). She was often at the White House. That year, at the age of seventy-six, she had a New York City park named for her, and she filled it with seven large steel and aluminum sculptures. On the occasion of her eightieth birthday, New York City gave her a huge party. She looked far younger than her chronological age and her astounding energy made it possible for her to produce forty to fifty sculptures a year—some of them large-scale steel works.

She was the only woman artist in America to make it entirely on her own. She separated from Charles Nevelson in the early 1930s, so no rich husband. No supportive lover, either—the men in her life were younger, drank more heavily, and were no match for her professionally or personally. While she was friendly with the most famous members of the New York School—Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning—she faced significant challenges in order to be taken as seriously. Some women artists, especially those who failed where she succeeded, hated her. But she had learned in early childhood that she would have to fend for herself if she wanted anything of life.

To be sure, Nevelson was not completely alone. All artists need intermediaries to promote their art and to make it possible to develop a career. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, galleries or art dealers have been the most common intermediaries between artist and public. Louise Nevelson had four major dealers—Karl Nierendorf, Colette Roberts, Martha Jackson, and, most famously, Arnold “Arne” Glimcher. Each played a crucial role. They helped her achieve international status as one of America’s most important woman artists.

The version of herself that Nevelson created and presented to the world often had her saying, “I am not bright.” But anyone foolish enough to believe that

soon discovered that Louise Nevelson was highly intelligent. Her pseudo-“dimness” was a defense against being seen as undereducated or inarticulate.

Louise Nevelson was unique, a one-off. She had her own style of dressing, of living, and of sculpting. Her work looked like no one else’s. She never looked the way artists were supposed to look; even when she was broke, she managed to look like a million dollars. In the 1930s and ’40s she became known as “The Hat” because she wore gorgeous chapeaux—sometimes stolen and sometimes purchased by lovers for her favors.

Despite her later reputation as a fashionista, Nevelson had almost always selected clothes for multiple purposes. When she was poor, she took a rare bit of extra money and spent it on a wool dress—by an expensive British designer—at Bergdorf Goodman’s. It was a long-sleeved, full-skirted black jersey, perfect for England’s damp, cold weather (as well as an unheated loft on New York’s Lower East Side). She bought it for its warmth as well as its beauty, and she wore it all winter to elegant parties and slept in it at night.<sup>3</sup>

What kind of a person was Louise Nevelson? How did her wit and warmth get conveyed in her work, when to some she had an aloof, even regal presence? In public she was most comfortable with a proud, straight-backed stance, though among close friends she could be wonderfully witty, warm, and down-to earth. She said that she couldn’t bend, that she was like a cigar-store Indian, made of wood. But she had many admirers and friends—Dorothy Miller of MoMA, Edward Albee, Merce Cunningham, and John Cage loved her.

Long before the women’s movement got underway, Nevelson was living the life she wanted, sleeping with the men she was attracted to, swearing like a sailor to prove her populist credentials, and never taking a day job—since that would keep her from the thing she cared most about. Making her art was the only thing that really mattered to her. At one point I thought about titling this book *Vissi d’Arte*, the aria Tosca sings to the world telling it in glorious melodic tones that, above all else “I lived for art.”

As Nevelson herself said: “I needed something to engage me, and art was that something . . . it was my entire life.”<sup>4</sup> “[W]hat accommodates me to fulfill myself, are things that I have made . . . I feel that work is basically fulfilling my awareness of life . . . My whole work constitutes a total world.”<sup>5</sup>

In the course of eight years working on this biography, I had no idea how many surprises I would encounter. Recalling the antipathy I had felt for her thirty years earlier when her self-centeredness seemed so offensive, I was amazed to discover entirely justifiable reasons for that “egotism.” She was a lone woman in a man’s world who needed not only to find herself as a person well before feminism, but she also had to make a place for herself as a strong artist in the crowded art world of the twentieth century. I finally came to see that without her

concentrated focus on her work and her self, she would never have made it. For Nevelson, self-discovery was the exact same thing as becoming the best artist she could be.

Since I had written my dissertation, Louise Nevelson's work had continued to change and progress, sometimes in fits and starts and other times with lightning-like speed. As she often said, "I jumped around"—working in various media and styles throughout her life. Though she earned her first celebrity through wood sculpture, in her seventh decade she turned to steel and aluminum, making large-scale public works that are now spread all across America, and she kept on making wood sculpture and drawing and doing collages.

As Nevelson explored many new media and materials and was touched by several new "isms," including minimalism, she continued to come out ahead of her compatriots in her reputation and the quality of her work. Despite the evolving styles she coursed through over twenty-five years, her work always looked like it could only have been done by Louise Nevelson. As her eye for compositional power and harmony sharpened over her lifetime, she kept finding new ways to edit and refine her work. She would happily recycle parts of previous works when she found what she deemed better places for them in her most recent work. She delighted in mixing the old with the new, whether it was a single wood scrap or a whole steel assemblage that she had used before. She came to so fully trust her eye that she was ultimately liberated to dare all—combining lace with glass, or a broom with wooden bric-a-brac.

Writing in 1971 in the *New York Times*, John Canaday noted: "Louise Nevelson's new exhibition . . . proves once again that the woman simply cannot be trusted. For several years now, from show to show, she has implicitly capped off her career with a final demonstration of her powers of invention, but each following year she comes up with something new. This refusal to settle into a rut is very wearing for us art reporters."<sup>6</sup>

"When I say that Louise Nevelson's sculpture is, for me, an affirmation of faith," Canaday observed, "you can put it that she has taken much of the detritus of our civilization and has not simply recombined it; she has completely transformed it. You may recognize a balustrade . . . a moulding, a dowel, planks of wood . . . but they are so transformed that their original function is simply no longer there . . . They are . . . transformed . . . into what I would call a spiritual expression. There are a very few special people who have the capacity to create, to bring together all they have assimilated and produce from it a play, a poem, a sculpture, a painting. They tell us more about what we are doing and what we are all about than we ever realize until we see their expression of it."<sup>7</sup>

Very soon after Nevelson started making sculpture she produced a group of witty creatures in the Surrealist manner of the times. These sculptures were

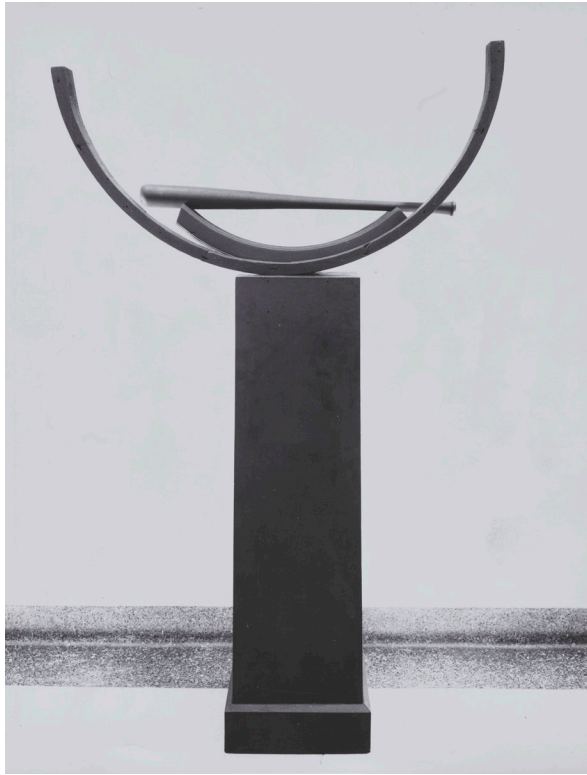


*Sailing*, 1957. No longer extant. Photograph courtesy of Geoffrey Clements

made from found wood in the early 1940s. The clever combination of furniture parts were turned into comedic contraptions that showed that she could match the Surrealist wit of the moment. Soon afterwards she combined simple wood pieces into evocative abstract compositions, which were much praised by art critics.

Some works from this golden era are very spare, such as *Sailing*, which is made up of only three parts, a barrel stave, a baseball bat, and a portion of a thick-ish curved arc. When the same elements were put together differently and the title changed to *The Game*, we struggle to comprehend that these two works are made up of the exact same elements at different moments in time. Both are masterworks. The constant is the extraordinary sense of balance. In *Sailing*, the perpendicular bat stands when it shouldn't, and the short, thick, curved piece of wood attached to it doesn't seem at all strangely connected—though it is. Together they become a mast and sail which symbolically carry the upward curve of the ship's shape into its wind-filled surge.

In *The Game*, we experience an entirely different composition. The large curving piece of wood has become like upraised arms greeting the sun. The



*The Game*, 1957. No longer extant. Photograph by Jeremiah Russell, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

smaller curved piece with its attached bat rests a bit uneasily at the bottom of the larger one. The bat's handle, jutting just beyond the framing curve, upsets the easy comfort of curves nesting together. Likewise, the negative shape formed by the tip of the bat, the fatter edge of the short curve and the long slope of the larger curve slightly destabilizes the work, giving it a similar vitality to the one in *Sailing*. In these two works we see the brilliance, wit, and the freedom of a master artist who—with a Picasso-like elegant economy of means—managed to see a bull in a bicycle seat.

Nevelson's first foray into exhibiting at a major museum in New York City was the all-white *Dawn's Wedding Feast*, which helped set her course as the twentieth century's pioneer environmental artist (creating works that were whole environments, in which viewers were immersed). No other sculptor was doing anything like this. As Nevelson repeatedly said: "Art is everywhere, except it has to pass through a creative mind."<sup>8</sup> And "Art is part of living, and sculpture is living. Naturally, you want all of life, so you make an environment—and that environment is sculpture too."<sup>9</sup>

One of Nevelson's most beautiful walls, *Sky Presence I*, in black-painted wood, was first seen in an exhibition in Baden-Baden, Germany, in 1961. The cura-

tor wanted a large wall for his museum show, and she was ready to work very big. She worked fast, combining boxes she had made a few years earlier with boxes made the day before yesterday, to produce a masterwork of composition: twenty-four boxes, 9½ feet high and more than 20 feet long, in three-and-a-half weeks.

Like any artist touched by Surrealism's ethos, working fast meant allowing one's unconscious to make its contribution. Look at this detail—a single box from *Sky Presence I*:

The artist joined together a clump of curved wedges on top of an oval frame and made them look as though they were about to tip the whole thing over. Or had she made them look as though they were rising up to roll the oval to the right? Or both? This little piece of liveliness is typical Nevelson. She called it "livingness." Even the nail holes play a part in this rhythmic dance. Likewise the shadows, deep at the top and pointed at the bottom, combine with the negative spaces behind the wedges to punctuate the whole work. Nevelson exhibited *Sky Presence I* at the 1962 Venice Biennale, where she was one of four artists representing the United States.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s Nevelson began to work in metal, mostly Cor-Ten steel. At first she worked with a grid format but soon left that behind as she extended the scrap steel works into space. Even near the end of her life, Nevelson did not stop inventing new formal compositions. In her last series of wood sculptures, *Mirror Shadow*, the frame disappears and the grid becomes a witty part of the composition, while all the parts seem to shoot out into space.

Any consideration of Nevelson's eighty-eight years of life necessarily leaves us with questions, the first of which is how to select, from the various versions of her life story that she recounted, which is the most likely to be accurate. Her family, as well as her close friends, could not always tell the difference between one of her fictional narratives and the probable facts. She was shameless about constructing aspects of her biography. Who else but she had a right to do so? I came to understand that behind such constructions there was usually a kernel of truth that was better revealed by the "story" than a strict reporting of the "facts." Keeping in mind that Nevelson was constantly crafting and re-crafting the particulars of her life, including her age and birthplace, one can begin to move on to asking the more typical biographical questions. How did she carry on with such confidence during the thirty years she spent in the art-world wilderness—from 1929 when she began art school to 1959, when her work was recognized as groundbreaking, even historically significant?

One could devote an entire book solely to Nevelson's relationship with her feminine identity: how it helped and hindered her career, her thoughts on Women's Liberation; even why, like many women artists, she donated so much of



her work, perhaps affirming the conception that it wasn't valuable enough to command a high price. Ditto her relationship to spirituality, which was similarly conflicted.

Still another volume could focus solely on the movements and figures who influenced her—there are still mysteries there to be solved. Why, even though her long term friendships with Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, and Willem de Kooning placed her smack in the middle of the Abstract Expressionists, was she rarely considered one of them? Nevelson came of age artistically in the 1930s and 1940s, and she always said that her artistic hero was Pablo Picasso and that Cubism was her foundation: how did that manifest in her work? And what about Surrealism, which swirled around every artist in New York in the 1940s: how much and for how long did it touch her?

Most significant, especially in the years since her death: What is the relationship between the public face of Louise Nevelson—"The Nevelson," as her friend Edward Albee called it—and the flesh-and-blood woman? Anyone who knows even a little about Nevelson is aware of "the Persona"—the mink eyelashes, the chinchilla coat, the turbans, clunky jewelry, and idiosyncratic way of dressing—which almost invariably brought out sparks, positively and negatively charged, when she entered a room. Did her persona, as Albee and others said, overshadow her art?

Which brings us back to the image of Nevelson as fundamentally a self-serving, self-inflating, and self-congratulating person. I believed that that was her true nature in 1976; but I do not believe it now. That she learned how to remain centered on her work and was reluctant to engage in anything that would distract her from her focus doesn't mean she was selfish but rather—and it was a term she often used to describe herself—self-aware. Fueling her conviction that she should only do exactly what made sense to her was her lifelong study of the Indian mystic Jiddu Krishnamurti and his empowering words about the self and freedom. She came to that astonishingly liberating study from a Jewish immigrant's background that subtly championed individual rights in contrast to local conventional constrictions. Though her mother had not been able to fight for her own free choices, she entrusted that vision to her three daughters. When she was young, Louise looked for champions for her individual vision in school—one of these was Lena Cleveland, her art teacher. As she matured she had to face stultifying challenges to her identity as an artist, whether it was marriage, motherhood, or just being "only a girl" in a crowd of many macho male artists. She kept going despite the difficulties, finding powerful female mentors along the way, some of whom she studied with (drama and dance) Princess Norina Matchabelli and Ellen Kearns. Others she read about or observed from a distance—Edith Sitwell and Jennie Churchill. And sometimes it was male mentors

who opened doors for her—Diego Rivera, Karl Nierendorf, and Arne Glimcher. But it was always her art that kept her moving forward.

Because I have training both in art history and psychology, I look at the artist's inner life. I aim to understand the major themes (conscious and unconscious) underlying her signature style, especially the environmental exhibitions of the late 1950s. I explore the links between Nevelson's childhood and her adult life as an artist. I also seek to clarify the complexity of Nevelson's multiple motivations and the repetitive patterns that could not be explained away by external factors. But I never see her as a case. She is an artist, a woman, and a very complex human being.

The past and present were constantly intertwined in Nevelson's life and especially in the ways she told her story. Nevelson's narrative is therefore slippery. Sometimes she confused and confounded events and her role in them. Sometimes she stood firm about facts that she later claimed were absolutely not factual. Like all of us, there were things about herself she did not want to know and had to deny. If one accepts her surreal "jumping around," as she described her storytelling, it all seems comprehensible, even profoundly interesting. If, however, we need to know the whole truth and nothing but the whole truth, we shall be alternately irritated, confused, or severely disappointed.

For the most part, Nevelson's narrative is conveyed aloud. She did not write letters, but she talked. She loved to talk—to friends, family, journalists—almost anyone willing to listen. Many of her words were recorded in print or on tape giving me ample opportunity to get to know her again, in a different context, long after her death.

Just as useful were the reviews from the art critics in New York who came to know her work very well and described it in considerable detail every time she exhibited. Their published write-ups in many cases both "locate" her work in the contemporary art-world context and help a biographer pin down when she did what. This problem of dating and sequence exists for most artists, except Picasso, who put the date and even the time of day on almost every work he made. Nevelson confounds the scholar by cannibalizing old works—combining parts from decades past, adding new elements, painting or repainting, making whatever revisions suited her at the moment. Photos of her work that she or her dealers had taken, especially those linked to dated illustrations from the press or catalogues, make for some degree of certainty.

When she died at eighty-eight, John Russell wrote in the *New York Times* that "Mrs. Nevelson was . . . among the most arresting women of her time" and "a pioneer creator of environmental sculpture who became one of the world's best-known women artists."<sup>10</sup> As I write this, a renewed appreciation of formalist art—which emphasizes how a work is made, as well as how it looks—and a

growing focus on the contributions of women artists in the twentieth century have spurred a revival of interest in her work, resulting in large international solo exhibitions in Italy, Germany, and Belgium. Furthermore, sold-out exhibitions at galleries and widely attended shows at prestigious American museums make it clear that what Russell said in 1988 is just as true in 2015, and beyond. Nevelson was not just “the most arresting” and “best-known” woman artist of her time, but one the greatest American artists of the twentieth century.

ONE

## RUSSIAN ROOTS

1899 – 1905

“This child is destined for greatness.” —Sholem Aleichem

A few days after she was born in the ancient Ukrainian city of Pereyaslav, Leah Berliawsky had a visitor.<sup>1</sup> Sholem Aleichem, the renowned writer of Yiddish tales, had come to visit his sister and stopped in at the Berliawsky home next door to greet the new baby.<sup>2</sup>

“This child is destined for greatness,”<sup>3</sup> the famous man declared when he saw her. Not surprisingly, the prophecy became legendary in the Berliawsky family, and Leah’s mother repeated it to her often. It became a talisman for the young woman decades later when she worried about her future success as an artist.

Because birth records of Jewish children in Russia in the late nineteenth century are difficult to trace, it is impossible to know exactly *when* Leah Berliawsky (later Louise Nevelson) was born. She knew very well *where* she came into the world, but the girl who became Louise Nevelson reckoned that, while few people outside Russia would have heard of Pereyaslav, everyone would know Kiev. So in her thirties, she claimed that she was born in Kiev—and in the year 1900. When did she come to the United States? More prevarication. She repeatedly said, “When I was four and a half.” But it is more likely she was five and a half. Either way, she was a young child when she arrived in America.

Entering school in Rockland, Maine, at approximately six years of age, Louise Berliawsky would have been confused about her birthdate as well as the fact that at birth she had a different given name. The effect was profound and lifelong. “I don’t remember names, I don’t remember dates,” recalled the artist