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art & man

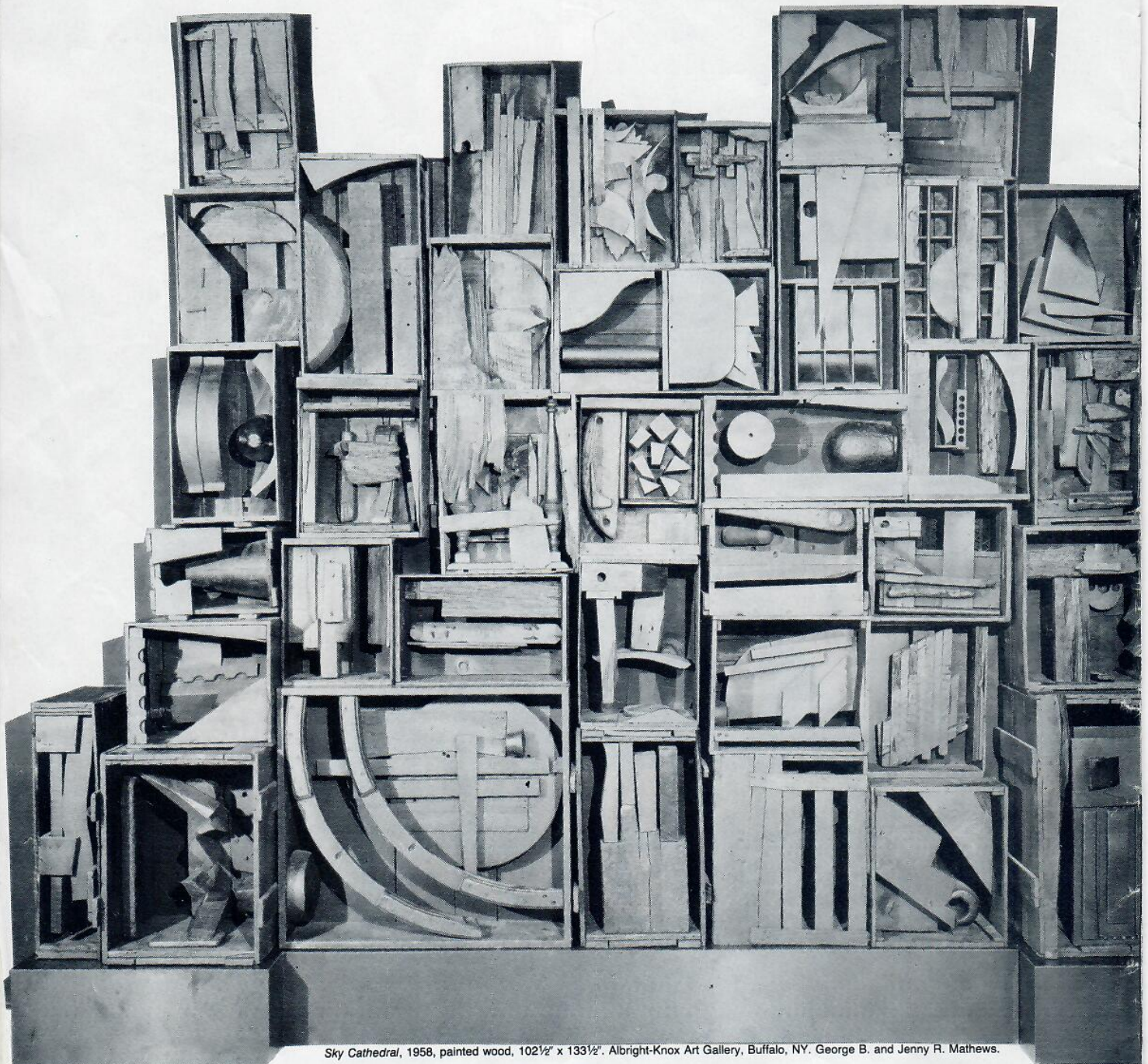
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WORKING WITH SHAPES

Special Feature on Louise Nevelson

THE MAGIC SPELLS OF **LOUISE NEVELSON**



Sky Cathedral, 1958, painted wood, 102½" x 133½". Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY. George B. and Jenny R. Mathews.

COVER: Louise Nevelson (b. 1899). Photo © 1979 Brownie Harris/Photoreporters.

What is black, ten feet tall, made out of old wood scraps, and worth hundreds of thousands of dollars?

The answer could only be an image such as the one you see on the left, created by the contemporary American sculptor, Louise Nevelson.

If you've ever actually seen a Nevelson sculpture, it is hard to

Works like this towering wall-sized "environment" (left) have made Louise Nevelson one of the most famous modern sculptors. The 82-year-old artist is also noted for the creative clothing she wears. "When I meet someone, I want them to enjoy something, not see just an old hag."



forget. A photo can't begin to convey the feeling created by these towering, black walls. As the artist says, "I create *places*, not sculptures." To visit a Nevelson exhibition is like traveling to another world. The galleries are usually dark, lit only by a few spotlights. Mysterious, shadowy forms seem to emerge from everywhere at once. Open boxes containing shapes of all kinds, like shelves filled with treasure, line the walls. Reliefs and black moons hang from the ceilings. Forms rise from the floor, hovering above mirror-surfaced bases that look like black pools. Only narrow, dark paths, like jungle trails, remain clear enough to walk through. The titles Nevelson gives her works are part of each piece, and help us to understand it. She creates structures like *Sky Cathedrals* (left), *Ice Palaces*, and *Dream Houses*. Dark, ancient *Moon Gardens* are filled with *Night Flowers*. And all these worlds are made out of old wood scraps that would otherwise have been thrown away.

Louise Berliawsky was born 82 years ago in Kiev, Russia. When she was five, her family moved to Rockland, Maine, where her father began a successful lumber business. Louise later married and went to live in New York City. As Nevelson's interest in art grew, she soon realized she would not be able to combine her responsibilities as a wife and mother with a full-time career as an artist. In 1931 she left for Europe to study art. Several years later she returned to a small New York studio where she began painting. She was not able to sell her work, so she lived by selling what jewelry she had, piece by piece. She tells the story of how she got her first show.

One day an old friend she hadn't seen for a long time invited her to dinner. "I didn't have five cents, but I had an outfit and it had been a long time since I had had a good dinner. After-

wards I suddenly realized that while I was having trouble eating, he had spent a thousand dollars in a day." The next morning Nevelson marched into the office of the most important art dealer in New York, told him she was a sculptor, and that he should give her a show. "I was so mad that if he had said no, I would have killed him."

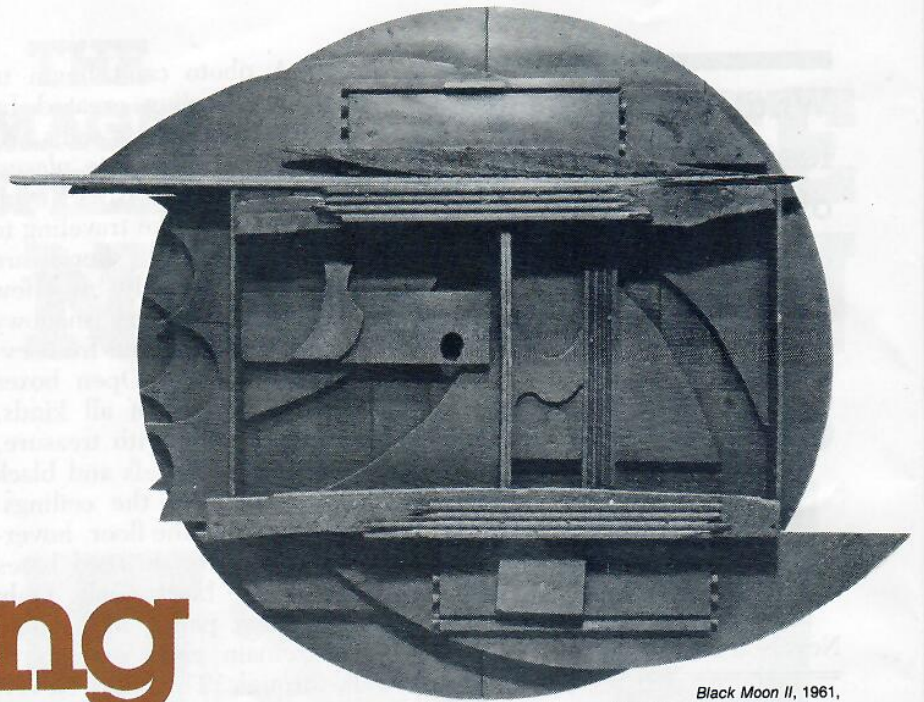
The reviews for Nevelson's first show in 1941 were generally good. However one said, "Had the artist not been a woman, we might have hailed these sculptures as by surely a great figure among moderns." In addition to being a woman sculptor, Nevelson faced another difficulty. She was an American artist. For years, Paris had been the art center of the world and important art was created only by Europeans. However, at this time, Americans such as Jackson Pollock and Alexander Calder were creating a new kind of American art that was rapidly gaining worldwide attention.

Louise Nevelson worked steadily for nearly 20 years more before finally discovering the style that would make her one of the most important sculptors of this century. She was fascinated by the *shape* of everything she saw, and in her work began to use the old discarded pieces of wood she found in the city streets. People wondered about the strange woman they saw carrying home milk boxes, orange crates, chair pieces, table legs, and toilet seats. They never guessed that she was transforming "all that junk" into her own magical world and that some day "that strange woman" would be one of the world's most famous artists.

In this issue you'll learn more about Louise Nevelson's life and work. You'll meet a young artist who also works with shapes and, finally, you'll be able to use some of these same ideas in creating a piece of your own.

Building A Private World

**"I create my own
universe with shapes."
—Louise Nevelson**



*Black Moon II, 1961,
painted wood. Private Collection.*

It is still dark, and the city streets outside the small brick building in lower Manhattan are quiet and empty. From the street, the little house looks very conventional, but inside it is very different. Piles of old crates and furniture parts fill the rooms. Bulging cabinets and closets are packed with posts, knobs, wheels and sticks. Shelves overflow with planks, driftwood, dowels, tools, and blocks of wood. At the far end of the house, a light is burning. Under it sits a woman surrounded by more pieces of wood. She glues together a quick sculptural "sketch" made of cardboard. Then she turns to a pile of packing cases and begins to glue wood fragments inside them, trying first one shape then another until she is satisfied. She works on this piece for a while, then picks the whole thing up and adds it to another pile across the room. Finally she reaches for a paint can and sprays the entire structure black. She turns and we can see her better. From her ears dangle huge black earrings, the turban on her head is covered by a black riding cap and, most surprising of all, at least three pairs of false lashes

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are glued to her eyelids.

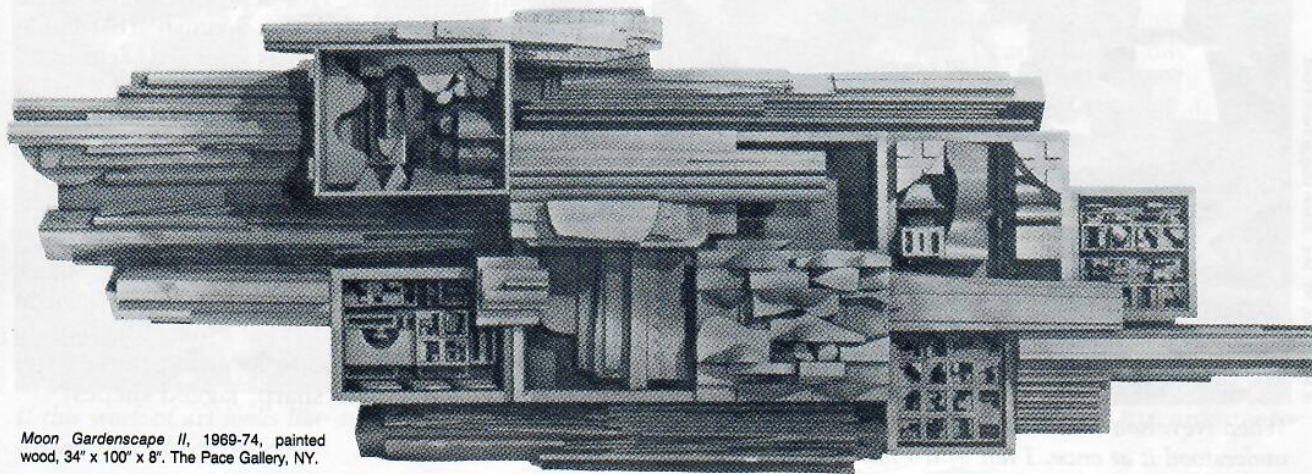
Every morning for over 40 years, Louise Nevelson has been rising at 4:30 in order to build her own universe. She creates a world of nature and mythology, of change and growth. She turns ordinary objects into poetry. The discarded things she uses in her "landscapes" are chosen for shape, scale, and texture, not for their original purposes. A tennis racket might be a moon, a chair leg can suggest a soaring tower or a mysterious plant. Because the objects Nevelson uses are old and worn and are just fragments, her sculptures convey the feeling of ancient and ruined civilizations. And she paints everything one color to *unify* the entire work so the shapes become the most important element.

Above left, a *Black Moon* hovers over *Moon Gardenscape II*, below. When you look at these two works, what kind of things do you think of—craters, phases of the moon, astrology, eclipses, crescent moons, the shadows you might see on a moonlit night, waves, faces (the "man in the moon")? No matter how complicated a Nevelson sculpture might seem to be at first glance, you will usually find that it is actually based on one very

simple geometric shape such as a circle, a square, a rectangle, a triangle. *Black Moon* is circular. How many circles, or parts of circles can you find in the work? Sometimes Nevelson will cut out a shape and use both positive and negative versions. Can you find any of these? How do the shadows act as shapes? And how does the focus of the entire sculpture change completely when you cover the small knothole that is near the center of the work?

If the circle is the most important shape in *Black Moon*, what shape is *Moon Gardenscape II* based on? Do you look at certain areas before you look at others? Notice how the "lines" made by the long sticks lead your eye from one box to another in a kind of rhythm. From what angle do you see this "gardenscape"? Can you imagine yourself high above it, looking down on the squares made by the rows of plants? Maybe you see the garden from the side. The texture of the long, thin stems or grass contrasts with the leaf or flower-like shapes.

But Louise Nevelson's mysterious black shapes can be "read" in any number of ways. The greatness of her works lies in the fact that they can suggest something different to just about anyone who looks at them.

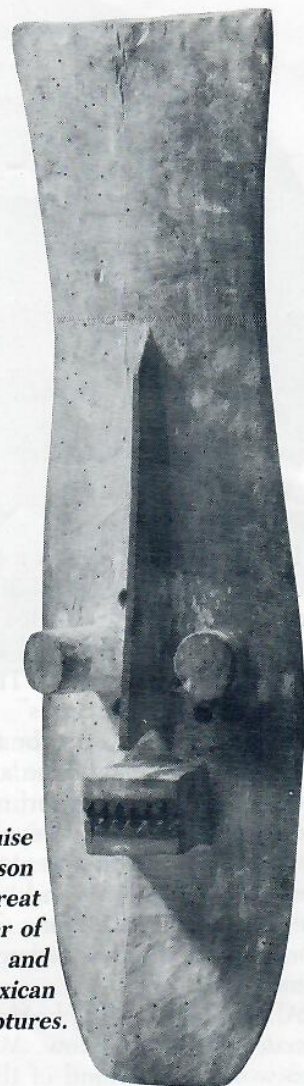


Moon Gardenscape II, 1969-74, painted wood, 34" x 100" x 8". The Pace Gallery, NY.

Shapes from Nature

Many African artists see nature in terms of *shapes*. Masks, such as this one, were created mainly for use in religious ceremonies and were based on natural shapes. In order to be most effective, the shapes are basic, simple and flat. The eyes are circles, the mouth a rectangle and, since fishing was important to the tribe of this artist, the face takes on the shape of a fish or a boat. Like Nevelson's works, the mask is made out of raw wood, which further links it to the forces of nature. Compare this work with the three forms on the right of this month's masterpiece on pages 8-9. At first they look very different, but look at the shapes, textures and sizes. Could they be figures, totems, or "primitive" monuments? Like Nevelson's walls, works such as this mask were not created only to be "works of art" but are meant to be a part of nature and of life.

WORKING WITH SHAPES



Louise Nevelson is a great admirer of African and Mexican sculptures.

Mask, Liberia, Cape Palmas Region; Crebo. Wood, 27 1/2" high. The Museum of Primitive Art, NY.

Pablo Picasso (1881-1973). *The Three Musicians*, 1921. The Museum of Modern Art, NY. Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund.



When Nevelson saw this work by Picasso she said, "I understood it at once. I felt as if I had done it."

A World of Cubes

As you look at the work of Louise Nevelson shown in this issue, what shape do you see most? She uses curved shapes based on natural forms (or organic shapes), but mainly her work is geometric, or made up of squares. Her sculptures have been compared with the work of the Spanish artist Pablo Picasso and the group of artists known as "cubists." Like Nevelson's works, the three main forms in Picasso's *Three Musicians* are set in a shallow stage-like box, seen directly from the front. All the shapes in the painting are simple, with sharp edges. Large, plain, flat shapes contrast with highly textured areas (the beards, the sheet music). And what about the lighting? Can you find black shadows that make definite shapes of their own in the works of both artists? What kind of feeling do Picasso and Nevelson create by using these long, mysterious shadows and sharp, jagged shapes?

Louise Nevelson's work looks like that
of no other artist. The
works on these pages will
show you where she got
some of her ideas.



Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968). *Bicycle Wheel*, ready-made, 1913 (original version). The Museum of Modern Art, NY.

If this work of art looks like an ordinary bicycle wheel, that's because it is!

A "Ready-made" World

Nevelson was not the first to use "found objects" as art. In 1916, the French artist Marcel Duchamp shocked the art world with his "ready-mades." People who were used to seeing only framed paintings and classical sculptures in museums would go into a rage when they came upon one of Duchamp's sculptures—a comb, a shovel, a ball of string, a bicycle wheel—mounted, labeled and signed, just like a work of art. Today Nevelson uses found objects for their interesting shapes. She puts them together and they take on other meanings, a process she calls "bringing them to life." However it is doubtful that we would be able to accept the use today's artists make of objects we regard as "junk" had it not been for Marcel Duchamp. With sculptures such as *Bicycle Wheel* (left), Duchamp opened up art, proving that artistic creation does not always have to conform to established rules.



Masterpiece of the Month 2

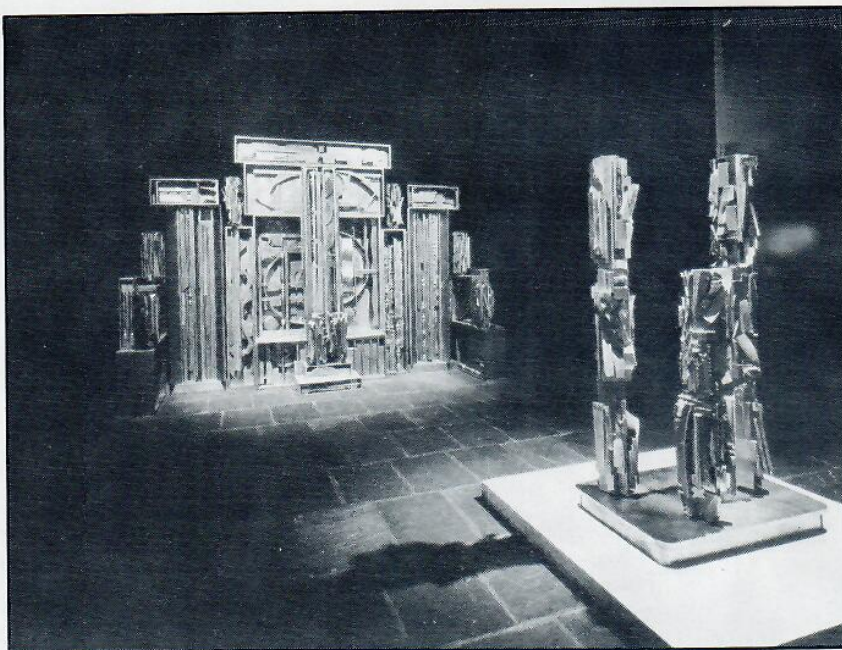
SCULPTURES BY LOUISE NEVELSON

An American Tribute to the British People, 1960-65 (left),
wood painted gold, 12' x 14 $\frac{3}{4}$ '; *Sun Garden* (right), 1964,
wood painted gold, 6' tall. Photo courtesy The Pace Gallery, NY.



Glittering Palaces:

SCULPTURES BY LOUISE NEVELSON



This month's masterpiece is actually two works. But Louise Nevelson's sculptures were created to be seen together, since they are all glimpses of the same world. They are life-sized environments, meant to *surround* the viewer. And the *space* between the works is as important as the *forms* themselves. We are invited to enter Nevelson's universe slowly, getting used to the dark gradually, as our eyes focus on vast, ghostly cabinets whose compartments are filled with magic objects.

What do you notice first about these two works? Nevelson is best known for her mysterious black sculptures, but she has also done pure white environments as well as these gleaming gold ones. Contrast the reflected shapes of these gold works with the shadowy forms of the black sculptures on pages 2, 4 and 5. In the large photo, you can see just why it is said that Nevelson's works destroy the boundaries between painting and sculpture. This is because they aren't really sculptures at all. They are more like flat screens—sometimes only inches wide—meant to be seen from one side

alone. The shadows and overlapping shapes give the *impression* of deep space. When she was young, Nevelson worked briefly in the theatre. The photograph shows how much her flat sculptures, meant to be seen only from the front, look like stage sets. The way in which they are set in a dark room, then lit by spotlights gives them the magic and impact of a play.

The two works shown above are *American Tribute to the British People* and *Sun Garden*. When seen together, what images might they suggest to you? The three tall forms on the right could be trees or plants, but compare them to the African sculpture on page 6. The work on the left is no longer only a wall. The two sides create an enclosed feeling, almost like a small chapel in a cathedral. The single tall, T-shaped object in the center might be part of a cross or an altar-like shape, inviting the viewer to take part in some ritual held within. And like some religious works, Nevelson's shapes seem made up of mysterious symbols, arranged in geometric grids, to be "read" for hidden messages. The artist says, "If I create a place, and people can have some peace while they are there, that will be a great achievement for me."

SEARCH FOR EXPRESSION

"From the first day in school to the day I graduated, everyone gave me 100% in art. Well, where do you go in life? You go to the place where you get 100%." —Louise Nevelson



Nine-year-old Louise Berliawsky and her family in 1908.



Twenty-three-year-old Mrs. Charles Nevelson.



Sculptor Louise Nevelson today.

There was never any doubt in Louise Nevelson's mind as to what she was going to do with her life. At five, she knew she would be an artist; at seven, she was going to be a sculptor. She still remembers the moment she discovered this fact. It happened nearly 80 years ago, "As I looked up, rows of glass jars glittered, each filled with a different kind of colored candy—peppermints, bull's-eyes, fruit gums. It looked like heaven. It was very magical."

Young Louise Berliawsky always felt different. When she was five, she and her family left their home in Kiev, Russia, to live in Rockland, Maine, nearly 5,000 miles away. From the moment they arrived, dressed in expensive clothes, jewelry, and huge fur coats, speaking only Russian, and just about the only Jewish family in the small Puritan town, the Berliawskys were different. Louise's father soon built up a very successful lumber business. Six-year-old Louise didn't like school, had few friends and spent much of her time in the lumberyard, assembling and carving scraps of wood. Nevelson explains, "Look, when I was a baby I knew I was going to be an artist. As long as I wasn't so smart, I was going to be great! What else could I do? I never made friends because I didn't intend to stay in Rockland, and I didn't want anything to tie me down."

During high school, Nevelson preferred to spend her time taking piano, voice, dance, and painting lessons rather than "wasting time" on social activities. In order to graduate, the school required each student to get job experience by working for five weeks, so, in her senior year, Louise had a part-time job in a local lawyer's office. One evening, her father brought a business friend home for dinner. The friend told his younger brother about Mr. Berliawsky's daughter, and at the age of 18, Louise went out on her first date. Two years later, she and Charles Nevelson married and moved to New York City. But soon, Louise Nevelson realized she could not have the kind of marriage her husband wanted and still be an artist. Still unable to believe it, she says, "He expected me home every night at 7:30 for dinner!" She adds, "Women at that time were meant to look pretty and throw little handkerchiefs around but never to show that they had what it takes. Well, I couldn't recognize that, and I never played the role."

The Collages of **JUANITA WRENN**

Juanita Wrenn is a collector—of ribbons and lace, broken beads, and especially paper. Out of these bits and pieces of things she creates unusual collages—like the one on the opposite page.

When she was little, she kept her finds in “treasure boxes”—an old cigar box her father gave her, or the little cedar box she bought at the beach. Now they are tucked into every corner of her room.

A few months ago, we visited Juanita at her home in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Here's what she told us about her work.

Juanita is now in her first year at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, DC.



When did you first get interested in art?

It goes way back to the third grade. We had to do a drawing of shoes. Everybody else drew them from the side, but I wanted to try them from the front and have them lying on top of each other crisscross. The art teacher made a big to-do about it and I guess it kind of went to my head. I said I was going to be an artist.

What are you interested in when you do a collage?

Usually color. I get excited about a certain green or blue. Or maybe a color like my favorite nightgown. I can't really say what they mean when I'm doing them—even though I'm totally involved. When I'm doing a collage I don't think of anything else. I'm just kind of engulfed!

One of your recent collages, right, won a Scholastic Art Award. How is it different from your earlier ones?

I was working more with line and shape. When I first got the idea in my mind, it was totally shape—geometrical, rectangles and squares. And it was all black and white and gray.

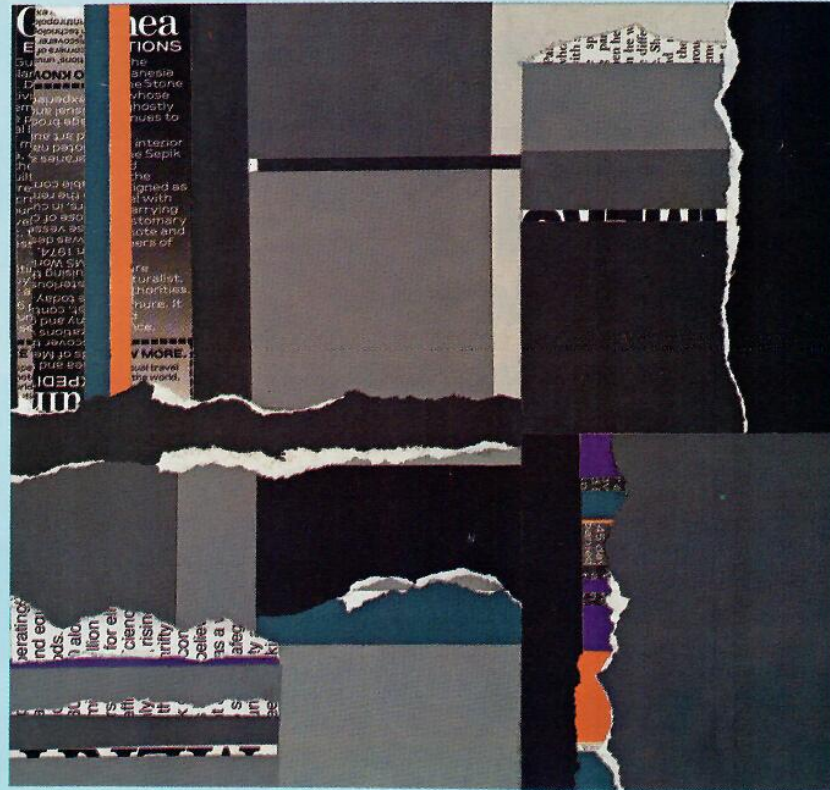
Was it an assignment?

Yes, we had to do a collage that used six colors maximum. We used Color-Aid paper, and magazines. It had to be 8 by 10 or smaller. First, we did several sketches. I tried different ways of breaking up the space geometrically, and chose the best parts of each one.

How long did the collage take?

That's hard to say. Maybe 25 hours over a period of three days. I would keep re-arranging—at lunch, in the afternoon after classes. "Does this seem right? Does it look good? Is it what I want?"

At dinner I wouldn't think about it at all. Then at night



Winner, 1981 Scholastic Art Award, Beyond Reality.

when I would go back to my room it would seem fresh, like a new piece. Sometimes I would have to start all over. My mind had totally changed some parts of it and I couldn't just leave it the way it was. It had to be just the way I wanted it.

Before I glued the shapes down, I put a piece of glass over the whole collage, and held it up to the mirror so I could see it reversed and from far away. Then there was more adjusting—as usual.

What feelings do you get now when you look at it? What does it remind you of?

I've never thought about it like this, but just now, it reminds me of a dark alleyway and concrete buildings. And the torn pieces seem like cracks in the walls. The colors—they're like sparks, movement, maybe people against the cold concrete.

Are you still planning to be an artist?

I guess it was about a year

ago when I really decided. Should I be an artist? Or is it just a fun thing for me to do—an easy way out? But then in my senior year, I went to the North Carolina School for the Arts and I couldn't imagine anything harder than art. And I figured art was the only thing I enjoyed enough to make it my whole life. I get really upset when I hear about people who have a job they hate. They choose a job because they can make a lot of money. Well, what's it worth if you're unhappy the whole time? That's kind of why I chose art.

Is there any advice you could give to our readers about doing art?

If they could just keep their imaginations open and flowing. And keep noticing things around them and how they relate—as colors, shapes or lines. Just to realize the beauty of walking down the street. Instead of just walking to get to the other end, why not enjoy it along the way?

CREATING SILENT MUSIC

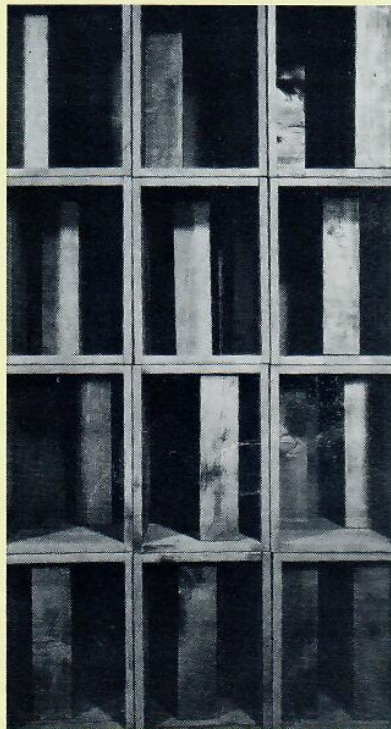


When you listen to music, you can hear the rhythm.
Find out how to create music you can see, by using shapes.

Seeing a sculpture by Louise Nevelson is an overpowering experience. And it is the arrangement of *all* of the parts together which is so powerful. We see the shapes in her sculpture not as separate pieces, but as a united force. We are affected by the *rhythm* which she shapes.

In creating a sculpture, Louise Nevelson may use discarded objects but she doesn't take them and toss them down randomly, allowing them to remain where they fall. She does just the opposite. Each object is very carefully placed in relation to all the others. Bit by bit, the entire sculpture comes into being. An overall rhythm is created.

Generally we associate rhythm with music. In music we hear a



In Silent Music Louise Nevelson creates a visual rhythm using only one basic shape.

repeated beat, over which the melody, or tune, flows. The same concept is true in art, where rhythm is used to hold a piece together. In Nevelson's work, the beat takes *shape*, and it is those shapes which are repeated. It is through *repetition of form* that rhythm is created.

In this workshop we will create an engulfing field of rhythm through the use of repeated forms.

MATERIALS

The only materials you will need are colored paper, large, white paper, Magic Markers, paste, and scissors.

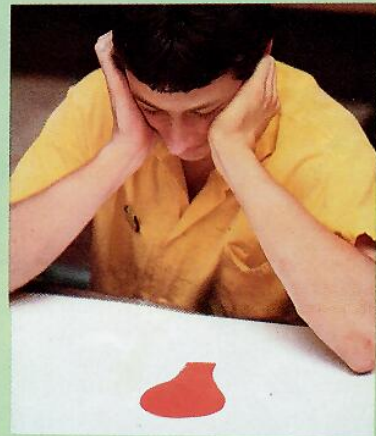
STARTING OUT



1. Quickly cut or tear a large random shape out of a piece of construction paper.



2. Place the shape anywhere on a large sheet of white paper and paste it down.



3. Now stop and ask yourself these questions: What space does the shape take up on the page? Are all of its edges the same? Are the edges sharp or soft? Do they move in and out or curve gently? Is the shape large or small in relation to the page? Before you move on to the next step you must be very familiar with the shape. Close your eyes and try to create a mental picture of the shape which you hastily created.



4. When you feel sure that you know your shape, take a felt marker (as close to the same color of your shape as possible) and begin to draw a similar shape next to the cut-out one. Don't try to duplicate the shape exactly, but try to capture the *feeling* of the original.



5. Continue to create solid shapes, similar in form to the original one. Try changing the sizes, but place them near each other.

When you are finished, you should have an entire field of shapes. Stop and look at it. Do you see that a rhythm has been created? The space between the shapes is important too, for it contrasts with the positive forms and reinforces the rhythm.

Photos by Richard Hutchings.

SOME SOLUTIONS



Ragged, torn edges can give a special feeling. Tiny shapes surrounded by white space can balance large, solid shapes. You may focus on one shape or create a pattern with shapes of the same size. Your work can be abstract or . . .



. . . it might look a little like some natural shape such as curved clouds or jagged lightning bolts. Your original shape can take up most of the space or be placed off in a corner.



You could change the scale by adding shapes larger than the original and extending them beyond the edges of the picture plane so they seem even larger. You can overlap shapes to emphasize the three-dimensional feeling.

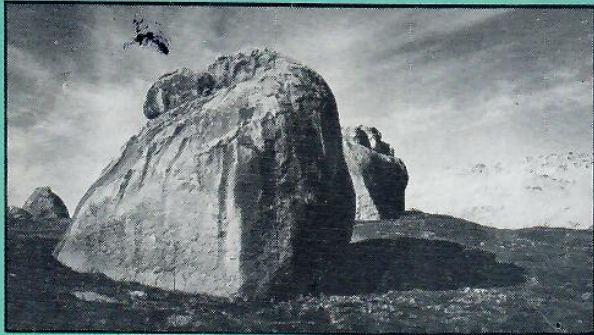


Your shapes can be based completely on nature. Here, each is different, but all these variations are based on one form (the "lightbulb" shape in the center).

Arts Alive

American Landscapes

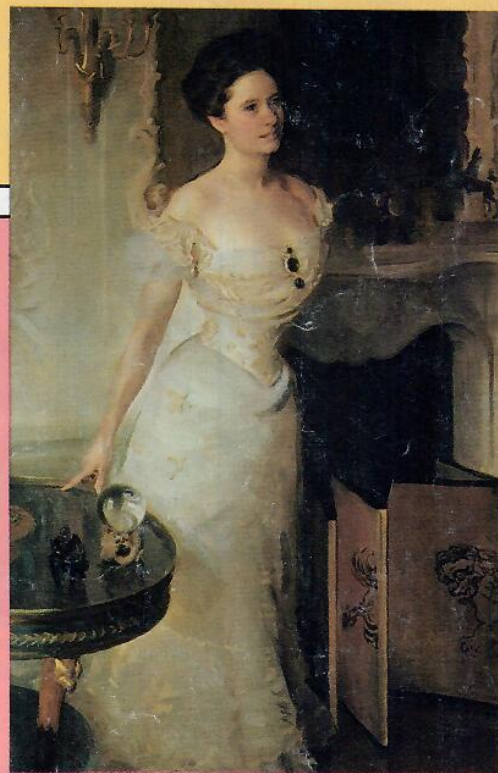
Next March, *Art & Man* will be featuring the work of the famous landscape photographer Ansel Adams, whose photos can make three ordinary rocks (below) look extraordinary. A new show called *American Landscapes* will give you a chance to compare Adams' pictures with those of 40 other well-known American landscape photographers. The show will be at the Worcester (MA) Art Museum, Nov. 24-Jan. 3, 1982; The Akron (OH) Art Institute, Jan. 23-Mar. 7, 1982; the Wichita (KS) State University Museum of Art, Mar. 31-May 9, 1982; Gibbes Art Gallery, Charleston, SC, July 1-Aug. 15, 1982; the San Antonio (TX) Art Museum, Sept. 10-Nov. 7, 1982; the Chicago (IL) Public Library, Nov. 29, 1982-Jan. 9, 1983; the University of South Carolina Museum, Columbia, SC, Jan. 31-Mar. 14, 1983; the Oklahoma Museum of Art, Oklahoma City, April 4-May 15, 1983; the Birmingham (AL) Museum of Art, June 6-17, 1983.



Ansel Adams (b. 1902). *Rocks, Sierra Foothills, California*, c. 1938. The Museum of Modern Art, NY.

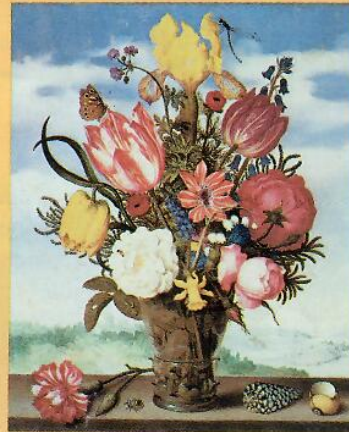
American Portraits

Today when we want to have a picture of someone, we pick up a camera and snap a photo. It's hard to realize that a century ago this wasn't possible. Before this century, only rich and famous people were able to afford portraits, and when they had an artist paint their picture, they wanted to look their best. In this major exhibition you will see formal portraits of presidents, soldiers, family groups, and society ladies such as this one by American painter Cecelia Beaux. When you go, look at the way the painters have treated their subjects' proportions, backgrounds, the colors they have chosen, and the angles from which they've painted them. Contrast this formal approach with that of many modern portraits. *American Portraiture in the Grand Manner* will open at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art Nov. 17 and end Jan. 31, 1982. It will then go to the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC, Mar. 17-June 16, 1982.



Cecelia Beaux (1855-1942). *Mrs. Larz Anderson*, 1900. Anderson House Museum of the Society of the Cincinnati, Washington, DC.

A Mirror of Nature



Last month in the Sept./Oct. issue of *Art & Man*, you discovered how artists of the Renaissance were able to paint space more realistically than anyone ever had before. Dutch artists are also known for their skill in painting space and nature, using a kind of "magic" realism that

sometimes looks more real than a photo. Notice how the tiny details in these flowers makes them stand out against the deep space of the background. This and many other 17th-century Dutch paintings can be seen in the exhibition *A Mirror of Nature* currently at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art until Jan. 3, 1982. It will then travel to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, from Jan. 20-Mar. 14, 1982 and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, from Apr. 7-June 20, 1982.

Ambrosius Bosschaert (1573-1621). *Bouquet of Flowers on a Ledge*. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Edward William Carter.