

Louise Nevelson
Essay from *Looking to Learn*

“If you want a kingdom, you have to build it.” So spoke Louise Nevelson, and that is precisely what she did. Her assemblage wood sculptures are unique artistic visions that are not easy to categorize. Their solid color tends to flatten the overall effect while still exerting a strong physical and three-dimensional presence. Her sculptures were vastly different than the work of other prominent artists of the 1950s and 60s like David Smith, Donald Judd, and Richard Serra whose minimalist works were carefully composed and executed in steel. Nevelson was more interested in the process of making the work than in creating a final, finished, permanent product. The changeable quality of her work is enhanced by the wood medium she used most often. She reused, recycled, and rehabilitated wood objects to create new images and express new ideas, a process she summed up by saying, “I don’t think you can touch a thing that cannot be rehabilitated into another life.”

Born in Kiev, Russia, she immigrated with her family to Rockland, Maine when she was four years old. Her father set up a lumber business there and so she grew up surrounded by wood and wood products. Rockland was a small town in the early 20th century and as immigrants, Nevelson and her family never felt fully part of the community. At age 20 she married and moved to New York City where she found the diversity and acceptance she had not experienced in Maine. Nevelson knew from a young age that she would be an artist and her family and husband supported her art, voice, and theater classes. She had one son named Mike, but sank into a deep depression after his birth due to the stifling effect married and family life had on her. She divorced her husband and left her son to be raised by her mother while she traveled to Germany to study painting. There she worked with Hans Hoffmann and discovered Cubism. She returned to New York but did not gain much recognition for her painting. She then turned her attention to sculpture (later destroying over 200 of her paintings) and at first created primitive cube-like figures. A New York gallery dealer saw them and gave her first show at 41, an age where many artists are looking to have retrospectives of their work.

Before long, she was building totemic figures and intricate boxes made of stray pieces of wood that she found on the streets of the city. Her elaborately layered and overlapping collages of found objects inside square frames create a dynamic tension between the organic objects and the geometric structures. Her methods were very highly intuitive, as she would respond to each piece for its placement in the overall work. To visually unite these instinctive compositions, she painted them a uniform color: black or white, and later gold. Known as “the architect of light and shadow,” Nevelson considered matter to be in a constant state of flux and transformation. She would reuse and recycle parts of her sculptures for new works even after a piece had been displayed in a museum or gallery. Her wood assemblages vary in size and scale and include freestanding sculpture, wall reliefs, and whole environments. Untitled is one of her large box wall reliefs. It is painted a uniform black, and is an intriguing study of light and shadow. As she said, “I fell in love with black; it contained all color. It wasn’t a negation of color. It was an acceptance. Black is the most aristocratic color. For me, this is the ultimate. You can be quiet, and it contains the whole thing.” The angled and circular pieces of wood, collage-like in structure, invite explorations and discussions of rhythm, texture, and pattern. As a visual object it has a powerful presence that causes viewers to stop really look, which was Nevelson’s intent.