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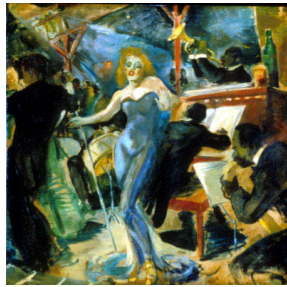
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## The Early Work of Franz Kline: The Bleeker Street Tavern Murals, 1940

by Evie T. Joselow



**Fig 1:** Hot Jazz (Chrysler Museum  
of Art, Norfolk, Virginia)

The career of Franz Kline (1911–1962) can be viewed as an evolutionary one in terms of his stylistic development from a figurative painter to an Abstract Expressionist.<sup>1</sup> The Bleeker Street Tavern murals, painted in 1940, represent a place to pause and examine the historical significance of a specific time and place in this artist's early oeuvre. Here in the eight examples of his early figural style we not only can find suggestions of abstract elements that dominate his later canvasses, but we can also look at the subjects depicted as autobiographical references to the artist and his environment at a specific time and place in history. On a biographical level they can be seen as true extensions of Franz Kline's life. His wife, Elizabeth Kline, observed that "Kline was a painter of his own life."<sup>2</sup> Underlying the portrayals of naked women, sexy singers, jazz musicians and circus performers are Kline's personal identifications with the subject matter and contemporary themes. Kline's personal occupation with such subjects as movies and movie-stars can be seen as being reflective of his place in society and of his relationship to the current trends of popular culture. On a historical level the subject matter of the murals can be seen as depicting fragments of the American cultural scene, embracing the new imagery created by Hollywood, and re-creating an accurate rendition of burlesque, as it existed in New York City in the mid-thirties. Finally, beyond the significance of the imagery and subject matter presented in the Bleeker Street Tavern murals, key stylistic elements, most notably the treatment of line and brushstroke, can be seen as clear reflections of the later Abstract Expressionist works that established and defined Kline's artistic career.

Kline came to New York in 1938, after spending time studying art in London, and settled into life as a struggling artist in New York's Greenwich Village. Despite monetary difficulties associated with the bohemian and artistic life in New York, Kline was able to continue to paint while working odd jobs, such as frame-making and carpentry, in order to pay the rent and support his new bride, Elizabeth Vincent Parsons.<sup>3</sup> In 1940 Kline was hired by the owner of a local watering hole on Bleeker Street, the Bleeker Street Tavern, to paint a series of decorative murals to enhance the atmosphere and promote a more lively and exciting atmosphere in his popular but assuming bar in Greenwich Village. Kline was instructed by the owner to "Paint me girls!"<sup>4</sup> The desire to have "girls" covering the walls of his pleasure establishment could be seen both as a business effort to create a decorative environment that would primarily attract male patrons.<sup>5</sup> Kline was paid five dollars a piece, plus canvas, to do ten panels which he filled with vivid scenes of half-naked women, circus performers, masqueraded figures, voluptuous dancers, and costumed men.<sup>6</sup>

At first glance these bold images can be understood as accurate graphic depictions of the cast of characters appearing in burlesque shows, a popular and appealing form of entertainment in the post-Depression era. The bleak spirit and financial hardship of the times gave rise to a letdown of sexual barriers and audiences were drawn to inexpensive “entertainments of a light and not-too intellectual activity” that provided a good distraction from their troubles.<sup>7</sup> For little money one could go to the burlesque shows and spend the day watching a variety of routines ranging from the comic to the seductive. Burlesque shows were intended primarily for men who wanted some sexual excitement, and to see a sexy show. In 1937 live burlesque performances were banned in New York City through the enactment of a municipal ordinance. Therefore the provocative as well as evocative imagery featured in the Bleeker Street Tavern murals panels can be seen as intentional visual and emotional replacements for the sights, sounds and actions of a live burlesque show.<sup>8</sup> Most importantly, the explicit displays of nudity and insinuating sexual stunts would have been enticing elements that would attract more patrons to the premises, as desired by the owner.

After 1937, in order to see any live burlesque acts, it was necessary for pleasure-seeking New Yorkers to cross the Hudson River and go to such places as Union City, New Jersey. The visual elements of Kline’s compositions strongly indicate that he himself made such journeys and that he was familiar with the presentation methods, theatrical moments and other intriguing characteristics of live burlesque acts. However, a second glance at the iconography of the murals also reveals recognizable symbols of contemporary popular culture to which Kline had a strong personal affinity.

Living in New York, in the artistic and cultural enclave of Greenwich Village, Kline availed himself of many of the popular forms of entertainment available. Kline was an avid movie-buff, frequently visiting the Waverly Theater on Sixth Avenue.<sup>9</sup> Kline’s fascination with Hollywood and its imagery, specifically the movie star, was reflective of another significant and influential popular entertainment that captured the interest and imagination of Americans, and by the 1930s had become an integral and familiar part of the New York streetscape. The popular imagery exported from Hollywood was evident in many streetscapes of New York.<sup>10</sup> As a New Yorker, Kline would have been familiar with the billboards and hundreds of studio-produced photographs that advertised and promoted the newest screen idol, and lined movie theater corridors, entryways and marques. Also, as an artist, he would have been familiar with the work of Reginald Marsh, who by the mid-thirties had already gained acclaim for his graphic and colorful depictions of Hollywood-style entertainments that populated the New York cultural scene, capturing the effects and vibrant presence of the movies and burlesque shows on the New York streets.<sup>11</sup> However, while similar energy and imagery are repeated by Kline, it should be noted that Kline did not really favor the graphic descriptions of the city by Reginald Marsh because he felt “they lacked an emotional depth.”<sup>12</sup>

Having identified the possible sources for the imagery contained within the Bleeker Street Tavern murals we can turn our attention to a discussion of the specific images contained within each of the individual panels. The order in which the ten panels were originally displayed is not known. However, we can attempt to organize them based on reconstructive description of a contemporary burlesque show in a New York theater before 1937, with each of the eight surviving panels viewed as individual acts. In the 1930s, such theatrical

performances were described as “plotless musical entertainments consisting of a series of unrelated episodes and dances” with the main attraction and specific purpose of each successive act being to depict or suggest subjects or objects of a sexual interest.<sup>13</sup>

Kline’s “burlesque show” conceivably began with the solo singer, as shown in the work *Hot Jazz* (Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia). [Fig. 1] This canvas captures all of the sensational and alluring elements of the opening act of a live show. The importance of the live performance was the singer’s appearance with a focus on her curvaceous shape and her subtle bodily movements being of special interest and allure. She would always be “strictly a blond” and dressed in a revealing garment.<sup>14</sup> This description fits the strawberry blond female vocalist featured in *Hot Jazz*. Adorned in a blue strapless gown and centrally positioned in the composition as the star attraction, she can be seen as the embodiment of the ideal burlesque model.

However, this representation of the “femme fatale” also has physical characteristics of the screen heroine of the thirties and forties. “Packaged to present the American male’s ideal of femininity, they were equal parts baby-doll, siren, and bombshell...platinum blond-golden haired saints, bottled blonds with painted lips like Jean Harlow or Mae West in the thirties, and Rita Hayworth and Lana Turner in the forties.”<sup>15</sup> Specifically, the body posture, golden hair, and dress draw close comparison to a publicity photograph of Rita Hayworth in the movie *Gilda*.<sup>16</sup> The identification of the burlesque performer in the guise of a famous movie-star clearly reflects Kline’s own personal interest in the cinema. Another element of popular culture and personal relevance to Kline’s life and interests is the jazz band positioned on the right side of the vocalist.

Beginning with Guy Lombardo’s introduction of Rudee Vallee at the Hotel Roosevelt in 1929, the solo vocalist became a necessary adjunct of a jazz dance band. Moving from the clubs that thrived in Harlem in the twenties, the jazz band became a staple for every good singer and every decent nightclub. By the early forties jazz had become an established musical taste in New York and Kline could have heard jazz played all over town, in clubs from Broadway to Greenwich Village.<sup>17</sup> However, while the jazz band would have been a staple of the cultural scene, it would not have been part of a genuine burlesque show in New York. The musical component of a live burlesque show was a pit orchestra playing from below the stage. Therefore, the jazz band in *Hot Jazz* can once again be seen as a reflection of Kline’s own interest in jazz and on a broader scale a statement about New York culture.

In a burlesque show, upon completion of the first act, concluding with the solo song, the female vocalist would strip and the next segment would be immediately introduced so as to continue the momentum and excitement. The next skit would be considered as an “hors d’oeuvre” between acts, while the patrons anxiously awaited the appearance of the next stripper. It would also add variety to the show by focusing on depictions of comic characters rather than sexual ones. One type of comic character would be a straight man, purposely singing a number off-key and out of tune.<sup>18</sup> In the Bleeker Street Tavern murals this act was represented by the panel *Singing Waiter*. Once again, as in a live performance, the tuxedoed singer in Kline’s work would have been the singer at a microphone who moved from table to table around the room crooning a song intended for lovers. However, Kline added a further comic element to the pose of this traveling waiter, who precariously tilts his

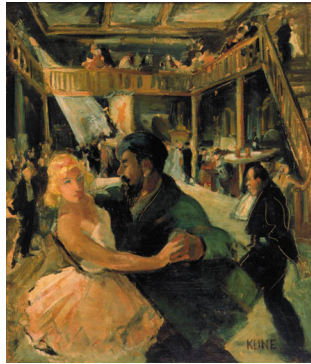
tray towards the comatose pair of lovers at the table in the foreground.<sup>19</sup> This bit of clumsy humor could be seen as indicative of Kline's own cynic attitude, developed at an early age as a cartoonist and in later years re-emerging in the perceived role of a comedian.<sup>20</sup> The idea of the comic would be continued in subsequent acts that focused on circus themes.

Circus themes were popular subjects for burlesque performances. Often a "Circus Theme Day" would be held in which all the vocal, dance and comic acts would relate to the circus. The focus of folly was sexual, but the presentations contained all the essential circus characters, from the comedic clown, the ring master, and the daring show girl. Male clowns would be seen as the comic characters and women would be seen as the horses, holding the key accessory of the ring master, the whip.<sup>21</sup> In the burlesque circus presentation, the whip also became a necessary accoutrement for the leading lady, enabling her to assume the powerful role of the sexual enticer and lead the performance on a planned course. In the panel *Circus Rider*, Kline represents the circus theme by showing a female bareback rider astride a horse holding on to a gallantly dressed male companion.<sup>22</sup> In this depiction the coarseness and vulgarity of the subject matter is transformed into an artistic performance of skill and grace. This sense of gentility can be discerned in the balletic pose of the woman who is fully dressed in a dance costume. Dance numbers were often choreographed to further interest patrons, with movements and positions being seen as "symbolic imitations of suggestions of the sex act."<sup>23</sup> Often, in order to increase the sense of "the charming, the erotic [and] the daring" a foreign Spanish flavor was added.<sup>24</sup> In the work *Apache Dancers* this Spanish element is clearly expressed both in the costumes and scenic background. The man on the right, dressed in a dark suit and wearing a hat, can be seen as the "matador" who points his sword towards the woman, or the bull on the right. The background setting can be seen as being representative of the architectural elements of a bull stadium in Spain, with the arched columned structure serving as a protective device to separate the spectators in their seats from the perceptively dangerous action in the center ring.<sup>25</sup>

The foreign and exotic elements of the burlesque show reappeared in other *Bleeker Street Tavern* panels that included dance themes, and also reflected the sophisticated audience of gentleman who patronized burlesque theaters. In *Dancer in a Red Skirt*, the startling half-nude female figure is surrounded by men wearing berets and top hats. However, the focus of the entire scene remains the sparsely attired female performer, who is lifted above the crowds displaying her exposed breasts.<sup>26</sup> Her elevated position reflected another New York City ordinance of the mid-thirties that allowed women to be elevated, but not to be physically touched. It also serves to highlight her theatrical role as a tableau or show-girl, and not just an object of desire. The fact that she bares her breasts was actually inconsequential to the overall effect of the entire burlesque show, and often the action itself would not receive much applause.<sup>27</sup> The burlesque patron was not titillated by nudity alone, but by the salaciousness accompanying the show. While the show-girl's performance was indeed able to command the attention of the audience, it was the torso dancer "who invit[ed] immediate concentration."<sup>28</sup> The torso dancer would appear in the finale act, parading on a diagonal path back and forth across the stage, the exposure of breasts by extending her arm over her head and towards the audience would be the final act of the whole burlesque show.<sup>29</sup>

Such a figure and pose is depicted by Kline in the panel *Masked Ball*. In this composition, the movement of the dancer is echoed in the diagonal forms and

lines that dominate the scene, painterly techniques and forms that dominate Kline's later abstract works. The degree of attraction that the torso dancer holds is shown in the man on the right who, in violation of decency laws, touches her breast. The elongated noses, blocked out teeth, and distorted mouths of the performers, further exaggerated by heavily applied make-up, were part of the comic effect built into the burlesque performance.<sup>30</sup> The characters depicted in Masked Ball draw comparisons to the costumed revelers that would attend masquerades and costume balls that became popular charity events in the 1930s.<sup>31</sup> The mixture of comic and carnivalesque caricatures clearly reflected in The Masked Ball further supports the notion that the Bleeker Street Tavern murals were a combination of popular ideas reflective of the world around Kline, and those that were part of his own personal world.



**Fig 2:** Dancing Couple. (Private Collection, New York)

Only one of the mural panels stands out as a solely personal reflection of Kline's own world: Dancing Couple. (Private Collection, New York) [Fig. 2] This particular work stands out as an anomaly in comparison with the subjects and themes presented in the other panel, in that none of the imagery can be related to burlesque or any other contemporary cultural trend.

Instead, the work can be interpreted as a very personal tribute to his wife Elizabeth, a dancer.<sup>32</sup> The left foreground of the composition is dominated by a couple dancing. The woman is wearing a ballet costume and the man appears to have a beard. However, it is the adoring gaze of the man, and not his dress that

attracts attention, suggesting that this figure is actually Kline and the woman of adoration, his wife. Such a close relationship between the figures is further suggested by their intimate pose, which is spotlighted by a strong diagonal ray of light that emanates from the second story of the room and crosses the dance floor to the couple. This bright light creates the illusion that they are the only ones dancing in the room, which appears to be more like a dance hall than a burlesque stage. This particular work also exhibits some of the key elements of Kline's later abstract works.

In considering the place of the Bleeker Street Tavern murals in Kline's artistic development, it is clear that they are more than just wall decorations with personal sentiments. Stylistically, they contain the seeds for Kline's later abstract works.<sup>33</sup> Specifically, the painterly technique and compositional organization of the individual panels, with strong diagonal emphasis, indicate that he was already experimenting with concepts of space, line, form, and color as if he "were testing what was possible or impossible."<sup>34</sup> The organization of the individual compositions also expresses Kline's interest in spatial depth. In most of the panels, the figural images are positioned in the foreground space, amplifying their specific characteristics while creating a discernible background space. This sense of spatial dimensions is clearly shown in the work Dancing Couple where the couple is pushed into the left hand corner, their legs cut-off by the bottom edge of the canvas, leaving the right side of the canvas open and accessible to the back of the room. In the work Hot Jazz, the spatial construction can also be described as having a baroque sensibility. The singer occupies a central space and serves as an intermediary scale between the foreground and background space. The composition "zooms in and out of scale steadied by the quick frontal poise of the singer's outstretched hand."<sup>35</sup>

This “baroque” pictorial style can also be seen in the out-flung arms of the torso dancer in *Masked Ball*. However, in this panel, the swirling motions of the dancer create the sensation of a continuous flow between foreground and background space, as well as producing a burst of energy that moves out beyond the edge of the canvas.<sup>36</sup> Such pulsating energy also emanates from the radiating gesture of the singer and is echoed by the profusion of diagonal and curvilinear lines which fill the canvas and move beyond the outer edges. In all of the Bleeker Street Tavern mural panels, both diagonal and curvilinear lines are also used to create form and volume. The contours of the figural images are drawn with fluid black lines that help accentuate the volumes of the bodies, and this attracts further attention to anatomical details that are so important to the understanding of the subject matter. Abstract forms are also created by swabs of bold colors, held together by faint drawing lines that express their own energy and emotion. Both the color and emotional content of the panels can be seen as oppositional. The autumnal colors of restrained reds, bright oranges, and darker browns produces both a gentle sadness as well as a dynamic sense of violence, that, like his later abstract work, is left to the viewer to discern.<sup>37</sup>

Franz Kline’s art occupies a unique position in American Modernism, particular in tracing the roots of the New York School of painters in the 1940s. The Bleeker Street Tavern murals stand out as expressions of his own artistic philosophy and as reflections of his life experiences as they related to the world around him and his own self-perceptions. In the murals, he was on stage at last with all his paraphernalia, gathered from his past educational training and his early observations and participation in the cultural life of New York City. The Bleeker Street Tavern murals are significant works in the repertoire of Kline and can be seen both as a summary of Kline’s early artistic interests as well as an indication of his future “modern” style. They also become significant as documentary depictions of the popular cultural environment that dominated a specific time and place in America. In studying these works, both biography and history become indispensable research tools that not only reveal personal associations of the artist, but also those that were shared by a broad public audience and still have an intriguing appeal.

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# The Early Work of Franz Kline: The Bleeker Street Tavern Murals, 1940

by Evie T. Joselow

## NOTES

1 Kline's move to abstraction has been viewed as both an overnight revolution as well as gradual and slow progression. According to Elaine de Kooning, one day Franz Kline visited a friend at his studio and viewed one of his own drawings magnified on a wall through a Bell-Opticon projector. She wrote "from that day, his style of painting changed completely. It was a total and instantaneous conversion, demanding...a completely different method of working with a completely different attitude...Any allegiance to formalized representation was wiped out of his consciousness. The work from this moment, contradicts in every way all of the work that preceded it, and from which it had so logically and organically grown." [See Elaine de Kooning in Franz Kline Memorial Exhibition. (Washington, D.C.: Washington Gallery of Modern Art, 1962): 14.] In contrast, Alfred Boime viewed Kline's artistic development and his arrival as a painstaking evolution, also traceable to the earliest drawings. [Alfred Boime in Franz Kline: The Early Work as Signals (Binghamton, New York, University Art Gallery and Purchase, New York, The Neuberger Museum: 1977):1.] Harry Gaugh also maintained that Kline's abstraction was the result of a stylistic evolution based on the fusion of drawing and painting. [Harry F. Gaugh, *Franz Kline's Romantic Abstraction*, Artforum 13, no.10 (Summer 1975): 28.]

2 Kline's wife made this statement in a letter to editor of Art News, correcting a remark made earlier by the artist Elaine de Kooning, who had earlier expressed the opinion that "any extension of visual activity... into biography [in Kline's work] would appear to be falsifications." In her letter, Mrs. Kline reaffirmed that biography was an essential element in the thematic development of his art "far more so than anyone realized." [Elizabeth Kline, *Letter to the Editor*, Art News 61 (January 1963): 6.]

3 According to Harry Gaugh, Kline and his wife moved often, living in various walk-up apartments and lofts in Greenwich Village. However, he did not specify if such moves were for financial reasons. [See Harry F. Gaugh, *Franz Kline: The Man and the Myths*, Art News, 84, no. 10 (December 1985): 63.]

4 "Review of Collector's Gallery Exhibition" Arts 35 (January 1961): 50. Although Kline faced great financial hardship, the Bleeker Street Tavern Murals were not "purely commercial jobs" which he did in order to make ends meet, as was suggested in *Painstaking Slapdash: Review of Whitney Retrospective of Franz Kline*, Time Magazine, 11 October 1968. The painter James Brooks also referred to Kline's early works as "buckeye paintings" which helped to pay the rent. [Harry F. Gaugh, *The Vital Gesture: Franz Kline in Retrospective* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985): 17.] Kline's

acceptance of such commissions ask the Bleeker Street murals was defended by his colleague Elaine de Kooning. According to de Kooning, Kline was not drawn to art as a way of life, but was driven to it by "the joy of the activity itself," which resulted in his acceptance of any kind of project. "In fact," wrote de Kooning, "a subject was necessary to set his ideas in motion." [Elaine de Kooning, Franz Kline Memorial Exhibition: 13.] Early in his career, Kline was also fortunate to acquire two important patrons, Dr. Theodore Edlich, whom he met in London in 1936, and I. David Orr, an industrialist whom he met during his first big break in New York. Both Edlich and Orr became both close friends and influential patrons in their financial support and promotion of Kline's career. Both commissioned as well as bought numerous works. Orr owned more than 150 paintings of Kline's in the forties, and Edlich, who served as Kline's personal physician bought 35 works during his lean years. [Elaine de Kooning, Franz Kline Memorial Exhibition: 12.]

5 H. M. Alexander, *Strip-Tease: The Vanished Art of Burlesque* (New York: Knight Publishers Inc., 1938): n.p.

6 In 1960 eight panels were removed, remounted, and sold in 1961 at The Collector's Gallery, 49 West 53rd Street, New York City. [Franz Kline Bar Room Paintings, New York, The Collector's Gallery, February 6–25, 1961]. The other two panels were said to be lost or stolen. [Review of Collector's Gallery Exhibition, Art News 59, no. 10 (February 1961):10.]

7 David Dressler, *Burlesque as a Cultural Phenomenon* (Ph. D. diss., New York University, 1937): 52.

8 This 1937 ordinance was the result of a cumulative campaign begun by Mayor Fiorello La Guardia who generated petitions that described burlesque performances as inciting "immorality...bestiality and degeneracy." [See Alexander, *Strip-Tease*: 107.] Due to the efforts of a powerful group of public figures and church leaders who felt that "only by closing up these plague centers and keeping them closed... can the city cure itself of the moral leprosy which they spread," renewal licenses for the fourteen existing burlesque establishments in the city were denied. This type of theatrical business that had thrived in New York since the late teens was forced to move elsewhere, namely across to New Jersey.

9 His wife remembered their frequent escapes to the movie house. She recollected that "no matter how poor we were [Franz] took me [to the movies] at least once a week—usually twice." [See Gaugh, *Man and Myth*: 64.] During this period Kline also painted several streetescapes,

capturing a realistic perception of the activity and action of the streets down to the details of the various shops and landmarks of the neighborhood. In his painting, *Street Scene, Greenwich Village, 1943* (Collection: Dr. T. Edlich), amidst the thick gestural lines and solid forms, the central building with a peaked roof can be identified as the Waverly Theater on Sixth Avenue, off 4th Street.

10 See Marilyn Cohen, Reginald Marsh's New York (New York: Whitney Museum of Art and Dover Publications, 1983): 13. Kline's fascination with Hollywood and its imagery was reflective of America's pre occupation with Hollywood. This trend was noted in 1938 by Sheldon Cheney who observed "It would be absurd to maintain that art claims the attention of the mass of American people as do such major interests as...Hollywood romance...[and the] comics." [See Sheldon Cheney, *Art in the United States*, in *America Now: An Inquiry into Civilization in the United States*, ed. Harold E. Stearns (New York: Scribner's & Sons, 1938): 82.] Kline was also known to have thought of himself as a Hollywood actor. Not only did he bare an uncanny resemblance to the British actor Ronald Colman, but he also possessed many qualities of the Hollywood actor: "a bravado, the ability to attract women, and the poise to hold an audience." Kline's friend Fielding Dawson recalled an episode in which, "Suddenly I saw him—his face was theatrical; he looked like Ronald Colman. I cried, 'Franz ! You look like—Ronald Colman!'" [Fielding Dawson, *An Emotional Memoir of Franz Kline* (New York: Pantheon Books. 1967): 19.]

11 For example, in such works as *Down at Jimmy Kelly's, 1936* (Norfolk, Virginia: The Chrysler Museum) and *Minsky's Chorus, 1935* (Private Collection) Marsh successfully captured the physical and energetic action of burlesque shows at some of New York's most illustrious nightclubs. In other works, such as *Twenty Cent Movie, 1936* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art) and *Paramount Pictures, 1934* (Private Collection), the allure of Hollywood is descriptively shown in the advertisements that plaster the entrances of the movie house, and by the female figures who convey the glamorous image of the Hollywood starlet.

12 John Gordon, *Franz Kline: 1910–1962* (New York: The Whitney Museum of Art, 1968): 9. Alfred Boime suggested that the voluptuous dancers, burlesque queens, and vocalist appearing in the Bleeker Street Tavern Murals spring directly from the theatrical scenes of Reginald Marsh. [Boime, *Franz Kline*: 9.] For further comparisons between Marsh and Kline see Boime, *Franz Kline*: 8–9.

13 Dressler, *Burlesque as a Cultural Phenomenon*: 19.



14 Alexander, *Strip-Tease*: 107. The actual burlesque performance began with a solo singing number introduced by a female chorus singing a song that would be recognizable to the audience. The songs were usually current ones and they were meant to be sexually explicit and to be delivered in a very blunt manner. [Dressler, *Burlesque as a Cultural Phenomenon*: 20] "After...the chorus goes backstage a bit...a singing woman will come forward...sing[ing] in an untrained, off-key voice, a song to which no one listens, the attention being riveted on her body and its movements. She may wriggle or she may not; this is just the curtain raiser." [Ibid., 65]

15 See Cohen, Reginald Marsh's New York: 13.

16 See John Kobal. ed., *Movie-Star Portraits of the Forties*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1977): 119.

17 While Kline personally had far-reaching musical tastes, he was most partial to the work of Bunk Johnson, an early pioneer of the jazz style whose music was enjoying a renewed interest by the early forties. [For more information about Jazz in New York see Barry Ulanov, *A History of Jazz in America* (New York: Da Capo Press. 1972): 148ff.] Irving Sandler, a chronicler of the artistic life in Greenwich Village, also took note of the contemporary jazz scene in the city. According to Sandler, "jazz was attractive because it was open and energetic; the improvisation of the creative individual rather than the interpretive group, and because it was an urban music, reflecting the tempo, tension, and energy of the city, particularly New York." [Irving Sandler, *New York School: The Painters of the Fifties* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970): 24.

18 Dressler, *Burlesque as a Cultural Phenomenon*: 65–66.

19 Review, *Arts* (Jan. 61): 50.

20 According to Frank O'Hara, "Kline loved paradoxes and theatrics: a great mime, he was fond of parodying, often wordlessly, always amiably, friends, artists, collectors, [as well as] museum officials." [Frank O'Hara, *Art Chronicles 1954–1966* (New York: George Braziller, 1975): 42.] Sidelined by a football injury in 1930, Kline took up drawing and became interested in the cartoons and illustration arts. According to Boime, Kline's interest in cartooning had its roots in American culture and represents a critical aspect of his stylistic growth. [Boime, *Franz Kline*: 5.] Due to the popular appeal of cartoons in the late teens and early twenties, the cartoon artist received a great deal of public recognition. A good cartoonist's work appeared in several newspapers and magazines that were mass-distributed across America, bringing fame and notoriety to the artist. Kline's model cartoonist was John Held, Jr. who became very popular during the Depression for his depictions of the good and

easy life of the passing twenties. [For more information on Kline's interest in cartooning, see Boime, *Franz Kline*: 2–5.]

21 Dressler, *Burlesque as a Cultural Phenomenon*: 6.

22 For a black and white illustration, see Gaugh, *Vital Gesture*: 38 (No. 29: oil on board, 45" x 45", Private Collection)

23 Dressler, *Burlesque as a Cultural Phenomenon*: 78.

24 Alexander, *Strip-Tease*: 6.

25 For a black and white illustration see Gaugh, *Vital Gesture*: 38 (No. 30: oil on board, 46" x 46", Private Collection). The scenic backdrop can also be viewed as a theatrical stage set serving as a reminder of Kline's earlier theatrical associations. In 1939, Kline was hired by Cleon Throckmorton, a scenic design company in New York that made theatrical props and equipment.

26 For black and white illustration see Gaugh, *Vital Gesture*: 37 (No. 27: oil on board, 46" x 46", Private Collection).

27 Dressler, *Burlesque as a Cultural Phenomenon*: 74.

28 Ibid., 78.

29 Alexander, *Strip-Tease*: 7.

30 This identification is an important one to make in terms of previous interpretations that perceive the imagery of the murals as having overtones of German Expressionism. [The connection between Expressionism and Kline's work is first noted in *Review, Arts* (1961): 10.] While *Masked Ball* could be compared to Emil Nolde's work *Dancers*, 1920, in terms of the figural depictions and the palette, the ideas of Kline's panel can be more closely linked to burlesque motifs, rather than to the philosophy of Expressionism. Furthermore, in terms of the present Kline literature, it would be difficult to identify any possible connections that Kline might have had with the German Expressionist movement.

31 Such an example would be the *Masquerade Costume Ball and Dance* of 1937, a notable event sponsored by the Federation of Works Progress Administrators (W.P.A.), Supervisors Council of New York to benefit its emergency fund for artists. Advertised as "a gala evening of gaiety and intrigue in a real carnival spirit—ingenious, comic and daring," such evenings would have drawn crowds from the creative and artistic worlds (Advertisement from the author's own collection).

32 Prior to their marriage, Elizabeth Kline was a dancer and it was probably through her that Kline became familiar with pictures of the great

Russian dancer Nijinsky as the clown Petrouchka, an image that he became intrigued with. [See photograph reproduced in Gaugh, *Vital Gesture*: 67.] Not only did Kline paint several portraits of Nijinsky in this famous role, but he also incorporated similar formal structure in his own self-portraits. Kline's personal attachment towards Nijinsky and his personal infatuation with this mythic dancer have been discussed and analyzed by contemporary colleagues and scholars, including Elaine de Kooning and Robert Motherwell, who recognized and compared Kline's feelings of loneliness and alienation to those depicted by Nijinsky in the role of Petrouchka. [See Elaine de Kooning, *Franz Kline Memorial Exhibition*: 13; and Tribute by Robert Motherwell, TMs, Artist File: Franz Kline, Collection of Museum of Modern Art Library, New York). Gaugh also suggested that Kline's feelings of loneliness were related to his role as an artist. "In spite of his gregarious, carousing, conversation-spinning nature, he was convinced that all artist's are lonely." [Gaugh, "Man and Myths": 62.] Finally, according to his friends, Kline loved to dance. One friend, Charlotte Brooks, recalled that "he had lots of arms when he danced, and that he was a born performer." [Ibid., 65.]

33 As Clement Greenberg observed, the Bleeker Street panels "show the artist already possessed the ambition and energy that were to explode into [his] dramatic...abstractions a decade later." *Review Arts* (1961): 50.

34 Ibid.

35 Bill Berkson, "Kline's True Colors," *Art in America* 74, no.10 (October. 1986): 143.

36 Gordon, *Franz Kline: 1910–1962*: 12–13.

37 According to Kline "The final test of painting, theirs or mine is does the painter's emotion come across?" [Selden Rodman, "An Important Abstractionist," *Cosmopolitan* (February 1959): 67.]