

# Esphyr Slobodkina

SIX DECADES OF GROUNDBREAKING PAINTING,  
COLLAGE AND SCULPTURE



**LewAllenModern**

Exclusive Representative of the Estate of Esphyr Slobodkina



*Deus ex Machina* (oil study), 1961, oil on gessoed masonite, 10" x 12¼"

## Esphyr Slobodkina (1908-2002)

### SIX DECADES OF GROUNDBREAKING PAINTING, COLLAGE AND SCULPTURE

Celebrated as a fearless and dedicated artist over the course of her 70-year career, Esphyr Slobodkina was a pioneer of early American Abstraction, a then-controversial art movement that brought concepts of European Modernism into an American idiom during the 1930s and 1940s. Known in the art world for her firm sense of independence and innovative creativity in a wide range of materials, Slobodkina helped establish abstraction as an integral part of American art.

A founder in 1936 and lifetime member of the legendary American Abstract Artists group in New York City, Slobodkina's artistic evolution was influenced by her earlier life experiences in Russia, in Manchuria, and ultimately in the United States—where she would spend the majority of her lifetime. She was an exceptionally talented and determined artist who eschewed prevailing artistic fashions and conventions.

By the time abstraction had become widely accepted in the 1950s and 1960s—thanks in part to her pioneering efforts—Slobodkina had compiled an impressive resume of exhibitions at important galleries and museums. That said, as one of the few women recognized within the

modern art movement, Slobodkina's career was still often overshadowed by men.

Today, however, Slobodkina is acknowledged as a groundbreaking innovator of American abstract art—one who was resolutely committed to her own personal vision. Both scholars and critics have now recognized Slobodkina's role as a significant pioneer in the development of American Abstract art and her important position in American art history is well established.

Born in Chelyabinsk, Russia in 1908, Slobodkina studied both art and music from an early age. In 1918, she was exposed to the work of David Burliuk—often described as “the father of Russian

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Futurism.” This was her first exposure to what she referred to as “totally abstract paintings—wild... in brilliant, spectral colors.” Burliuk's Cubo-Futurist paintings provided a life-long influence on Slobodkina.

By 1921, as the political tensions of the Russian Revolution escalated, Slobodkina and her family escaped to Harbin, Manchuria. There she studied art and architecture—both of which would prove influential throughout her life.

In 1928, Slobodkina moved to New York City and enrolled in classes at the prestigious National Academy of Design. With its structured and rigid academic orientation, the program was artistically stifling to Slobodkina. Seeking renewed inspiration beyond her studies, she became drawn to the work of important European Modernists Alexander Archipenko and Constantin Brâncuși.

At the National Academy, Slobodkina encountered another Russian student, Ilya Bolotowsky. Considered a promising student at the Academy,

Bolotowsky was fascinated by the then up-and-coming theories appearing in the art world. Bolotowsky would become Slobodkina's very influential mentor and subsequently her husband.

Though Slobodkina and Bolotowsky were together for essentially three years, their mutual immersion in the new premises of art would enable both of them to spring forward toward transformative new experiences in their careers. Through Bolotowsky, Slobodkina met Byron Browne, Gertrude and Balcomb Greene, Giorgio Cavallon, and others whose conversations roamed from the cost of canvas to the "latest capers in Picasso's procession of quickly changing styles." This was a transformative time for Slobodkina, directing her toward her life's missions.

Slobodkina's art in the early 1930s was marked by the influence of Post-Impressionism. In 1934, she received a fellowship to work at the renowned Yaddo artist colony in Saratoga Springs, New York. At Yaddo, Slobodkina demonstrated bold colors, forced perspective, and geometric reduction in

her paintings. An example of this is her 1934 painting, *Flowers in the Sink*, which is reminiscent—in both forms and colorations—of the room interiors painted by Van Gogh.

Slobodkina would continue this theme in New York with her first Cubist-inspired painting, *The Sink* (1934-1935), now at the Heckscher Museum of Art in Huntington, NY; and in *Pot Bellied Stove* (1937), now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. In these works, her subject is the concrete reality around her, reduced by Slobodkina to flat, geometric forms and toned shapes that suggested her own form of Cubism.

Slobodkina immersed herself in the New York art world in the late 1930s. At that time, most American critics approached the new contemporary art derisively, attacking the work of many Europeans working in abstraction and cubism including the works of Picasso and Matisse. They often resoundingly endorsed message-laden art, such as Regionalism or Social Realism; abstraction was viewed as an unacceptable aberration



*Thrust Trophy No. 3, 1998*, mixed media wall construction, 8½" h x 7¾" w x 5½" d



*Swan Lake, 1996*, oil on gessoed masonite, 19¼" x 15⅝"

at best. When Esphyr Slobodkina co-founded the American Abstract Artists group, she and her fellow members were staunchly opposed to these rigid conventions. Slobodkina helped organize exhibitions of abstract art, beginning in 1937 with a groundbreaking exhibition at the legendary Squibb Galleries.

The efforts of Esphyr Slobodkina, Alice Trumbull Mason, and other major proponents of the AAA ultimately paid off. Today, critics and art historians alike recognize American Abstract art for its "strong color, tight, controlled brushwork" and "very clean look," as well as its "freshness, directness, and literal quality."

By 1936, Slobodkina had fully embraced abstraction as a means of artistic expression. She moved quickly through her Cubist experiments toward a preoccupation with geometric planes and flattened pictorial space. Over time, her work slowly morphed into lyrical, curvilinear geometric forms that, on occasion, hint at real-life subjects. Importantly, works by Slobodkina—even at their most abstract—can readily be defined as "portraits" of the entities being depicted, as in *Abstraction with Chair* (ca. 1940) and *Turboprop Skyspark* (1950). To Slobodkina, abstraction was a means to examine and activate the spirit of an actual entity. Slobodkina's definitive style—beginning in the late 1930s—demonstrated the architecturally inspired, hard-edged abstraction for which she became well known.

Strikingly, in her characteristic way of alternative perceptions, Slobodkina incorporated textural, soft shapes that read almost like fabric cutouts—reflecting a lifelong interest in both fabric and the art of collage. The breakthrough to the three-dimensional materials provided great freedom of creativity for Slobodkina and helped to develop her abstract style further. Her collage-like abstract paintings consist of flat, layered forms—often overlaid in carefully constructed spatial configurations. Slobodkina continued to explore abstraction in painting, in particular employing industrial

and mechanically inspired imagery with a powerful graphic, architectural sensibility, in works such as *Deus ex Machina* (1961), *Amethyst Mines* (1961-62), and *Looking Backwards* (1982).

As art historian Ilmar Eric Orav stated, “Despite the fact that Slobodkina works with flatness, there is an implied depth without the use of perspective that makes her unique. She simply does it with line. The areas of colors are flat, but her drawing and her color scheme give the illusion of inventive depth that can only exist in painting.”

Never one to be contained by one medium or one methodology, Slobodkina—from the 1930s and throughout her career—created a series of surrealist-inspired sculptures made of wood, wire, and found mechanical objects. Reflecting her interest in architecture, modern technology, and the ephemera of daily life, Slobodkina would go on to create a number of sculptural constructions using found objects, including *Small Familiar Personage* (ca. 1950s) and *Thrust Trophy No. 3* (1998). These sculptures were often consciously whimsical—conveying the joy the artist experienced in their creation.

A simple, but excellent example of Slobodkina’s unusual (and largely unprecedented) ability to utilize “cross-over” media can be seen in the mixed media and collage work, *Crossroads* (1948). Slobodkina’s use of collage was a masterful way by which to transform reality and make day-to-day objects into art. The individual components that she chose (such as the blue telephone in *Crossroads*) take on an architectural and structural function—very different from how they were originally conceived. This work provides a sense of the artist’s methodical thought processes, linking her paintings with her more spontaneous and improvisational sculptures and constructions.

In 1942, Slobodkina’s works were the subject of a one-person exhibition at America’s first modern art museum, A.E. Gallatin’s Museum of Living Art

in New York. That same year, art critic Clement Greenberg wrote a pivotal review in *The Nation* magazine, in which he praised the works of Slobodkina shown in the Sixth Annual AAA exhibition and noting that the exhibit as a whole might indicate “the probable future of abstract art in this country.” Likewise, the following year, in 1943—at the enthusiastic recommendation of Alfred Barr, the first Director of the Museum of Modern Art—Peggy Guggenheim included Slobodkina’s work at her gallery, Art of This Century, in a show called, “Exhibition by 31 Women.” Among the jurors for this show were Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst.

In 1945, Slobodkina was one of three women included in the important exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, “Eight by Eight: Abstract Painting Since 1940.” Perhaps the halcyon of any American artist’s career at that time, Slobodkina was included in Ad Reinhardt’s beloved (and impressively accurate) cartoon *How to Look at Modern Art in America*, published in 1946. Reinhardt’s cartoon is still considered today to be a scholarly benchmark in American Modern art.

Slobodkina continued to fuse and layer graphic architectural forms throughout the rest of her career. This quality comes to fore in such works as *Turboprop Skyshark* from 1950. Slobodkina depicted this turboprop aircraft with a cool, yet sophisticated detachment, breaking it apart into singular graphic images and creating a composition that conveys the turbulence and the strength of this unprecedentedly powerful military airplane. Although this is a flat painting (oil on gesso board), it feels three-dimensional, much like her earlier assemblages. Art critic Stuart Preston reviewed Slobodkina’s 1951 solo exhibition at the New School (which featured *Turboprop Skyshark*) and praised her “ingenious” sensibility, naming her “one of the more convincing and assured painters of today.”



*Black Crosses*, 1982, oil on canvas on masonite, 13¼" x 7¾"

*Turboprop Skyshark*, as well as *Levigator* (1950), illustrate a recurring motif within her art: the suggestion of the various structures and armatures of the technology and culture of her time. Slobodkina reconfigures these intimations into the underlying framework of her art, further animating her paintings, sculptures, and collages as engaging dialogues between composition and architecture, stillness and motion.

Between 1950 and 1994, Slobodkina’s works were exhibited in six of the Whitney Museum’s “Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting,” as well as three other Whitney Museum exhibitions in 1963, 1992, and 1994.

Over her lifetime and subsequently, Slobodkina’s works have been exhibited in other museums including the Metropolitan Museum, the Walker Art Museum, and at the Galeria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna in Rome. Currently, there is an exhibition being planned at the Centre Pompidou in Paris that will include Esphyr Slobodkina’s work.

Esphyr Slobodkina viewed herself as an artist who was willing to take chances. While some have tried to categorize the artist and her work in any number of ways—the artist dismissed those descriptions with a brisk wave of her hand.

In 2002, the *New York Times* art critic Grace Glueck wrote in a review that perhaps comes closest to capturing Slobodkina’s artistic essence—an essence that continues to influence contemporary artists today: “[Slobodkina’s] paintings and collages of interlocking geometric forms are considered her signature works.” Praising the remarkable multi-faceted aspects of Slobodkina’s works, Glueck stated, “None of Ms. Slobodkina’s works suffer from her versatility. They are all of a creative piece, and a pleasure to behold.”

— Justin Ferate



*Crossroads*, 1948, mixed media collage, 5" x 7"

## EDUCATION

1928 National Academy of Design, New York City, NY

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2019-20 *Esphyr Slobodkina: Six Decades of Groundbreaking Painting, Collage, and Sculpture*, LewAllen Galleries, Santa Fe, NM
- 2009 *Rediscovering Slobodkina: A Pioneer of Abstraction*, Heckscher Museum of Art, Huntington, NY (traveling exhibition)
- 2004 Kraushaar Galleries, New York, NY; also 2002
- 2003 *Esphyr Slobodkina: Abstractions*, Hillwood Art Museum, Long Island University, C.W. Post, Brookville, NY
- 1997 *Thinking in the Abstract: The Paintings and Sculpture of Esphyr Slobodkina*, Heckscher Museum of Art, Huntington, NY
- 1989 Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York, NY (also 1985, 1984, 1982, and 1980)
- 1984 *Esphyr Slobodkina: An Introspective*, Art and Cultural Center of Hollywood, Hollywood, FL
- 1978 *Paintings & Other Things by Esphyr Slobodkina*, Hollywood Art Museum, Hollywood, FL
- 1958 *Esphyr Slobodkina: Paintings and Collages*, New School for Social Research, New York, NY
- 1954 *Slobodkina*, John Heller Gallery, New York, NY
- 1951 *Paintings by Esphyr Slobodkina*, New School for Social Research, New York, NY
- 1948 *Tangents*, Norlyst Gallery, New York, NY
- 1947 *Esphyr Slobodkina*, Norlyst Gallery, New York, NY
- 1942 *Esphyr Slobodkina: Recent Painting and Sculpture*, Museum of Living Art, New York, NY
- 1938 *15 Abstractions by Esphyr Slobodkina*, New School for Social Research, New York, NY

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2018 *Intermission*, Naples Museum of Art, Naples, FL
- 2007 *Michael and Marilyn Gould Collection of American Modern Art (1918-1949)*, New Britain Museum of American Art, New Britain, CT
- 2002 *Modernism and Abstraction: Treasures from the Smithsonian American Art*, American Art Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
- 2000 *Twentieth-Century American Art: The Ebsworth Collection*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; and Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA
- 1998 *Art of This Century: The Women*, Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, East Hampton, NY; and Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, Italy
- 1996 *American Abstract Artists*, (also 1983, Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC; 1982, City Gallery, Department of Cultural Affairs, New York, NY; 1979, 1974 and 1959, Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, NY; 1977, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM; 1972, 1970, 1967 and 1964, Loeb Student Center, South Gallery, New York University, NY; 1969, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, NC; 1968, 1966, 1965, 1960, 1958, 1956, 1954, 1951, 1949, 1947, 1945, 1943, 1941, and 1939, Riverside Museum of Art, New York, NY; 1962, IBM Gallery, New York, NY; 1961, Lever House, New York, NY; 1957, The Contemporaries Gallery, New York, NY; 1955 and 1950, New School for Social Research, New York, NY; 1953, Artists Equity Association, New York, NY; 1952, New Gallery, New York, NY; 1951, Galerie Karin Hielscher, Munich, Germany; 1950, Galeria Nazionale D'Arte Moderna, Rome, Italy; 1948, Chinese Gallery, New York, NY; 1946, American

British Art Center, New York, NY; 1944, Mortimer Brandt Gallery, New York, NY; 1942, Fine Arts Galleries, New York, NY; 1940 and 1938, American Fine Arts Galleries, New York, NY; 1937, Squibb Galleries, New York, NY)

- 1992 *Fables, Fantasies, and Everyday Things: Children's Books by Artists (1930-1945)*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY
- 1989 *The Patricia and Phillip Frost Collection: American Abstraction*, National Museum of American Art, Washington, DC
- 1930-45 National Museum of American Art, Washington, DC
- 1983-84 *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America, 1927-1944*, Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, PA (traveling exhibition)
- 1975 *Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors*, Union Carbide Exhibition Hall, New York, NY (also 1970, Loeb Student Center, South Gallery, New York University, NY; 1968 and 1966, Union Carbide Exhibition Hall, New York, NY; 1968, 1961, 1960, 1959, 1958, 1956, 1955, 1954, 1953 and 1941, Riverside Museum, New York, NY; 1965 and 1964, Lever House, New York, NY; 1957, Silvermine Guild of Artists, New Canaan, CT; 1950, New School for Social Research, New York, NY; 1952, 1951, 1949 and 1944, National Arts Club, New York, NY; 1948, 1946 and 1945, Wildenstein Galleries, New York, NY; 1943, Gallery of Modern Art, New York, NY; and 1942, Wildenstein & Co., Inc. Galleries, New York, NY)
- 1959 *Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (also 1955, 1953, 1952, 1951, and 1950)
- 1953 *The Classic Tradition in Contemporary Art*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN
- 1945 *Eight by Eight: American Abstract Painting Since 1940*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA
- 1943 *Exhibition by 31 Women*, Art of this Century, New York, NY
- 1942 *25 Abstract Painters*, A.E. Gallatin's Museum of Living Art, New York, NY

## SELECTED MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, MN  
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC  
Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis, MO  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA  
Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA  
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC  
The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY



*FMS Abstraction*, 1985, oil and pencil on canvas mounted to board, 11" x 13"



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above: *Purple Abstraction*, 1939, oil on canvas, 20" x 27 $\frac{3}{4}$ " cover: *Turboprop Skyshark*, 1950, oil on gessoed board, 16 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 20 $\frac{3}{4}$ "

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