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Louise Nevelson. New York, Guggenheim Museum

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The original query could then be re-phrased as: why did Velázquez paint so many portraits of court jesters? And the answer need not lie in a special Hapsburg aberration: Velázquez was in constant contact with these men in the palace apartments and corridors, both as painter in residence and in the fulfilment of his duties as chamberlain, and it does not seem strange that he might have wanted to paint them, for they presented an extraordinary spectrum of physical and psychological types whose portrayal, unlike those of the royal family, he could undertake with complete artistic freedom. That Philip IV should have encouraged his painter in this undertaking is also not surprising; these characters were a conspicuous part of the royal household (as is clear from Velázquez's own *Las Meninas*) and the king must have appreciated the artistry and life-likeness of their painted images as much as we do today, with the extra measure of enjoyment that knowing the subjects must have added.

Velázquez is, in a way, the star of this exhibition, and van der Hamen's *Portrait of a dwarf*, which inspired it, derives some of its importance from being a notable precedent for the great master's unforgettable portraits of Philip IV's buffoons.

NINA AYALA MALLORY

\**Monstruos, enanos y bufones en la Corte de los Austrias*. By Manuela Mena Marqués. 131 pp. + 37 col. ills. (Museo del Prado).

### New York, Guggenheim Museum Louise Nevelson

The Russian-born American sculptor Louise Nevelson is by now one of the renowned figures of American art. The Guggenheim Museum recently showed (to 1st September) several of her strongest works, and a sample of her working processes in the form of five collages and a delicate model for one of the large sculptures on view. Two of the sculptures, *Luminous zag*, *Night* (1971) and *White vertical water* (1972; Fig.93) require frontal viewing. *The floral garden* (1962-85) is a free-standing, walk-through piece set up on the spot that is the axis of the museum's snail-shell spiral. Since Nevelson's work at once sets up organic relationships with the human figure and with its architectural environment, it was highly suited to the ground floor concourse area of the Guggenheim. However, her work can only be appreciated in the flesh, and neither photographs nor words can do much to augment it. With sculptures of such lyricism and physicality, a visual, conceptual, tactile and emotional response is needed. Only in front of these works can one grasp their infinity of scale and their intimacy of surface detail.

Nevelson's sculptures are impossible to verbalise. Yet if we can understand why they have this quality, we are close to their origins. They are indescribable in words because verbal, theoretical processes did not inform their genesis. Nevelson arrived in the U.S. in 1905 at the age of six. She studied briefly at the Art Students League in New

York and briefly with Hoffman in Munich during the period 1929-31. She was early interested in the forms and structure of Picasso and Gaudi, but more deeply struck by Mayan architecture in the Yucatan (around 1950) and by pre-Columbian sculpture. However, her orthodox artistic study never went into imitative detail or desire to develop such models. Her work evolved as it were, alongside these precedents. It bears the marks of the phenomenal strength of mind that made her declare her intention to be a sculptor at the age of nine.

Around 1958 she began to exhibit her characteristic style of wall-sculpture and sculpture-stack environments as in the *Moon garden plus one*, a black-painted assembled wood installation. She limited her colours to black, white, and for a short period, gold. Her vast-scale concepts such as *Dawn's wedding feast* (1959) are totalities which grow in symbolic, organic relationship to architecture, trees, plants, domestic objects and machinery of the human environment. Arp's sculpture is often cited as having affinities with Nevelson's. Closer perhaps are some of Max Ernst's 'natural history' paintings such as *Petrified city* and *Great forest*. Nevelson is an accessible sculptor and widely enjoyed, for viewers develop particularly private responses to her work as they do, for example, to the equally romantic and individual compositions of Klee. In both these artists, their art both describes and informs their own private, domestic reality. Klee created in close proximity with, and sometimes for, his small son and wife, with animals, plants and music interweaving in his imagination. Nevelson's work is part of her house and the life she leads there. She said in an interview published in Arnold Glimcher's monograph in 1972: 'The feminine mind is positive and not the same as a man's. I think there is something female about the way I work. Today, I was working on some small things in my living room.'

Equally important to Nevelson's formation was her imaginative response to the form and pattern of everyday objects. She remarked in the aforementioned interview: '... a white lace curtain on the window was for me as important as a great work of art. This gossamer quality, the reflection, the form, the movement, I learnt more about art from that than in school.' Her father owned a lumberyard, which was presumably full of random formations of unshaped timbers. One of her earliest memories, en route from Kiev in 1905, was visiting a candy store in Liverpool and seeing jars of coloured candy stacked on shelves. The found elements that she uses in her large pieces, which Hilton Kramer called 'sculptural architecture' are various and resourceful. They include chess pawns, draughts, balusters, baseball bats, tennis rackets, hat forms, toilet seats, stair finials, gun stocks and of course curved or angled shapes fashioned by herself.

The five collages on view show Nevelson's two-dimensional imagination at work and display her sensitivity to the elements of texture, cracked or frayed or stained surfaces of wood or cardboard, and torn, or-



93. *White vertical water*, by Louise Nevelson. 1972. Painted wood in 26 sections. 131.3 by 45.7 cm. (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York).

ganic or angular shapes which play in planned juxtapositions. It is unfortunate that there is no museum in New York which possesses an entire Nevelson 'opera', but the Guggenheim is fortunate to have these three large sculptures. *Luminous zag* is a relatively severe and formal piece which creates a richly rhythmic tension between formality and business. It has a mysterious, glistening surface of polished black and suggests a building façade at night with balconies, pilasters and fire escapes or staircases. *White vertical water* (Fig.93) is a lovely towering piece which describes the energy of a falling stream, waterfall or millrace. Its lines of force plunge in narrow vertical shapes from the top like a powerful cascade. Below, broken, jumbled rounded forms froth and boil and rebound sideways and up. The whole edifice dances. *The floral garden* includes large broken shards of bronze-painted rough terracotta, which resemble the surface of baked mud. They combine and contrast with a rectangular, forceful painted-wood structure. Each of these sculptures has a numinous feeling and poetry of its own, which tends to grow so absorbing after a period of time that it draws the spectator into a world of mystique.

VIRGINIA TILLYARD