

# Harold Lehman

## The Nineteen Thirties



Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center

4 August – 30 October 2022



*Man's Daily Bread*, 1937-38. Oil on canvas, 20 x 70 feet. Mess Hall, Men's House of Detention, Riker's Island NY. Federal Art Project, Works Progress Administration (destroyed)

**Harold Lehman** (1913-2006) was born in New York City. After his parents separated, he and his brothers were sent to the Hebrew Orphan Asylum in the Bronx, where he received his earliest art training. He later took art classes at summer camp, and worked as an assistant to a sculptor in Manhattan. In 1929 he moved to Los Angeles to live with his father and attended Manual Arts High School, where he befriended fellow students Philip Goldstein (later Guston) and Jackson Pollock, who was then an aspiring sculptor. They were mentored by Frederick John de St. Vrain Schwankovsky, chair of the Art Department, who arranged extra drawing classes for them and introduced them to Theosophy and the teachings of Krishnamurti. In his senior year, 1931, Lehman was the art editor of the school's yearbook, *The Artisan*. After graduation, he won a scholarship to Otis Art Institute, where he continued his training in sculpture.

In 1932, inspired by the political and artistic ideas of the Mexican muralists, Lehman turned his attention to painting and joined a group formed and directed by David Alfaro Siqueiros, who was visiting Los Angeles. Known as the Bloc of Painters, they created portable fresco panels on leftist themes that were scheduled for exhibition in February 1933 at the John Reed Club. The night before the opening, the police "Red Squad" raided the building and destroyed the frescoes. A few months later, however, Lehman's first major canvas, *The Landlady*, won an award in a group exhibition at the Los Angeles Museum.

The following year, after studying painting with Lorser Feitelson, Lehman embraced Post-Surrealism—a movement initiated by Feitelson and his wife, Helen Lundeberg—and his Post-Surrealist

work was shown in several galleries and museums throughout California. Also in 1934, together with Philip Goldstein and Reuben Kadish, he was hired by the newly-formed Public Works of Art Project, the first of the federal New Deal art programs, to paint a mural in a Los Angeles trade school. Although they did not complete the assignment, it gave Lehman valuable experience that paid dividends when he returned to New York City in 1935.

While employed by the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project, Lehman again teamed up with Siqueiros, who was in New York to attend the American Artists' Congress. During his stay, the Mexican painter established what he called an Experimental Workshop to create public artwork, including parade floats and banners, as well as paintings using novel approaches to composition and technique. Siqueiros advocated the use of industrial materials, including liquid paint, and "controlled accidents" as a means of generating expressive imagery. Among the artists Lehman recruited for this venture were Jackson Pollock and his brother Sanford. After Siqueiros left New York, the workshop carried on for a year under the auspices of the Artists Union.



Siqueiros (center) at the Experimental Workshop, 1936. Photo courtesy of Lisa Lehman Trager

In 1937, Lehman began work on *Man's Daily Bread*, his magnum opus for the Federal Art Project, a 20 x 70-foot mural in the mess hall of the House of Detention for Men, a city jail on Riker's Island in the East River. The mural's themes were the gathering and processing of basic food materials and honest productive labor, flanking a family seated around a table. On the table, a loaf of bread symbolized the sustenance of home and family, a positive image to the inmates. As Lehman described it in his proposal, the family "provides the basis for most of man's activity, and . . . is the basis of most human relationships." Executed on canvas panels *in situ* from 1937-38, the mural filled the room's east wall and was seen by every prisoner three times a day during meals. Sadly, it was removed some time in the 1960s and is presumed lost or destroyed.

Lehman produced several detail character studies for *Man's Daily Bread* that were exhibited at the National Society of Mural Painters, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the 1939-40 New York World's Fair. One large figure, *The Driller*, is now in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. A number of portrait heads were acquired by the Wolfsonian—Florida International University, which has generously lent a selection to the current exhibition. During this time, Lehman was commissioned by a physician to paint a portrait of a human skull. As a model, he borrowed the skull—reportedly stolen from the Art Students League prop cabinet—Pollock kept in his studio and which remains in the Pollock-Krasner House collection.

In 1941, the U.S. Treasury Section of Fine Arts, another of the New Deal art programs, commissioned Lehman to paint a mural for the Renovo, Pennsylvania post office. The town was a center for the repair of railroad locomotives, which became the painting's theme and also illustrated the town's contribution to the war effort. One of the last murals to be completed under New Deal auspices, it was painted on canvas in Woodstock, New York, and installed in 1943. Depicting the men at work, Lehman included a union badge on each worker's cap as an expression of solidarity with the labor movement.

During the war, while working and exhibiting in Woodstock, Lehman participated in the Artists for Victory program, producing posters to support the War Bond Drive and other war-related themes. In 1946 he returned to New York City, where he pursued painting, sculpture and photography, and held art classes in his studio on West 21<sup>st</sup> Street. He also worked as a scenic artist for theme parks, museums, theaters and television, and designed exhibits at the 1964-65 New York World's Fair and Expo '67 in Montreal. As his website notes,

"Throughout the rest of his life, Lehman continued to experiment with various mediums, including Polaroid film. At the age of 85, he got his first computer and taught himself how to use Illustrator and Photoshop, creating computer art."

Since Lehman's 1933 two-person exhibition (with Philip Goldstein) at the Stanley Rose Bookshop Gallery in Los Angeles, his work has been exhibited widely and featured in important historical surveys, including "Pacific Dreams: Currents of Surrealism and Fantasy in California Art, 1934-1957," at UCLA/Armand Hammer Museum, and tour; Post-Surrealism: Genesis and Equilibrium," at the Pasadena Museum of California Art; and "Surrealism USA," at the National Academy of Design, which featured his iconic Post-Surrealist painting, *Portrait of a Dancer, Plus a Sculptor*. Also "Nexus New York: Latin/American Artists in the Modern Metropolis," at El Museo del Barrio; and most recently, "Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925-1945," at the Whitney Museum.

### **Harold Lehman: The Nineteen Thirties**

focuses on the period when Lehman was close to Jackson Pollock, from their high school days in Los Angeles to their continuing friendship in New York City. His outgoing personality and artistic fluency—Pollock's biographers described him as "extravagantly gifted"—contrasted with his friend's taciturn character and struggles with conventional art training, but evidently there was a strong bond between them. Without Lehman's encouragement, Pollock would not have joined Siqueiros' Experimental Workshop and been introduced to the unorthodox media and spontaneous tactics that later made him the most famous abstract painter of his generation.

The exhibition could not have been realized without the enthusiastic cooperation of Harold Lehman's daughter, Lisa Lehman Trager, who administers her late father's estate and maintains a comprehensive website detailing his life and career, which ranged far beyond the scope of this project. We are also grateful to Shoshana Resnikoff, Curator, Kimberly J. Bergen, Chief Registrar, and Amy Silverman, Assistant Registrar of The Wolfsonian—Florida International University for facilitating loans from the museum's collection. The exhibition and publication are made possible by the Pollock-Krasner Endowment and the Thaw Charitable Trust Endowment. Lectures are supported by the John H. Marburger III Fund of Stony Brook University, the Herman Goldman Foundation, and a generous donation from Dorothy Lichtenstein.

## Works in the exhibition

*Self-Portrait*, 1933

Oil on canvas, 38 ½ x 32 ½ in.

The Wolfsonian—Florida International University,  
Miami Beach, Florida. The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr.  
Collection

*Illustrated on the front cover*

Untitled (Portrait of a man), 1934

Pencil on paper, 9 ½ x 7 ¾ in.

Lent by Lisa Lehman Trager

Untitled (Head of a man), 1934

Pencil on paper, 13 ½ x 9 ¼ in

Lent by Lisa Lehman Trager

*Derelect*, 1937

Ink on paper, 17 ½ x 11 ½ in.

Lent by Lisa Lehman Trager

*Refinery*, 1937-38

Study for Riker's Island mural

Oil on fiberboard, 17 x 7 ¾ in.

Lent by Lisa Lehman Trager

Studies for *Man's Daily Bread*, Mess Hall, House of  
Detention for Men, Riker's Island, NY

Lent by The Wolfsonian—Florida International  
University, Miami Beach, Florida. The Mitchell  
Wolfson, Jr. Collection

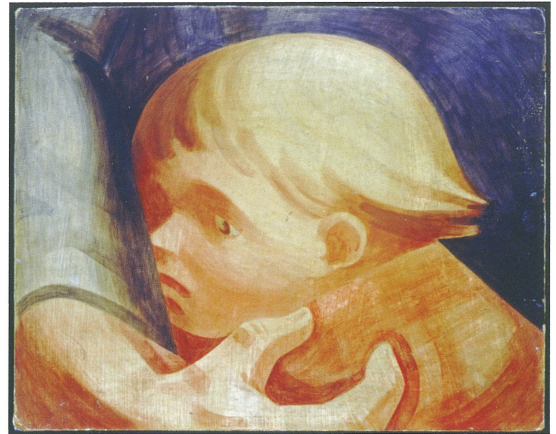
Head of a woman, 1937-38

Tempera and casein on Masonite, 19 x 23 7/8 in.



Head of a child, 1937-38

Tempera on Masonite, 16 x 20 in.



Heads of two women, 1937-38

Tempera on Masonite, 16 3/8 x 19 1/2 in.

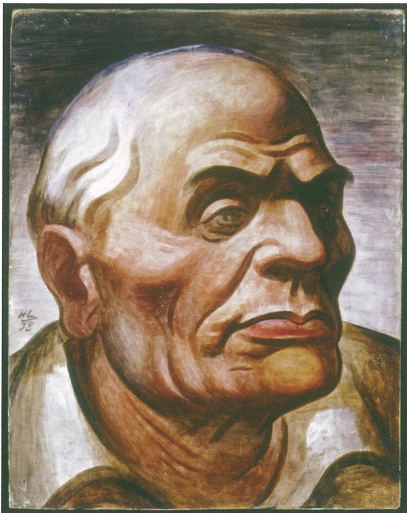


Heads of steel workers, 1937-38

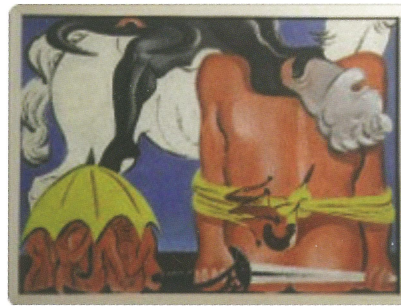
Tempera on Masonite, 16 3/8 x 19 1/2 in.



Head of an elderly man, 1937-38  
Tempera and casein on canvas, mounted on cement  
board, 24 x 19 in.



*Munich Pact 1*, 1938  
Oil on board, 12 x 16 in.  
Lent by Lisa Lehman Trager



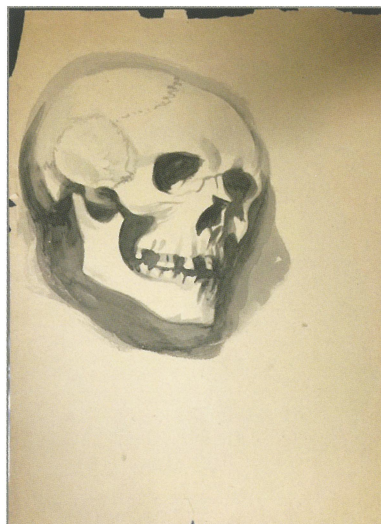
Head of a man, 1937-38  
Casein and gesso on Masonite, 20 3/8 x 25 1/2 in.



*Marian Anderson Lincoln Memorial Concert*, 1939  
Oil on board, 7 x 8 3/4 in.  
Lent by Lisa Lehman Trager



*Skull*, 1940  
Ink wash on paper, 20 1/2 x 17 1/2 in.  
Study for a lost painting  
Lent by Lisa Lehman Trager



Reproduction of *Man's Daily Bread*  
Fabricated by Duggal Visual Solutions  
Image courtesy of Lisa Lehman Trager

Human skull, date unknown (model for *Skull*, 1940)  
Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center  
*Illustrated on the back cover*

Documents, photographs, and ephemera lent by Lisa  
Lehman Trager



*Pollock-Krasner*  
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