



# Artist Vera Klement

Unknown Artist, *Portrait of Vera Klement*, ca. 1983, photograph.

Vera Klementovna Schapiro (Vera Klement, 1929-2023) was born in the Free City of Danzig, a city-state in Germany (now Gdansk, Poland) in 1929. Klement grew up in Zoppot (now Sopot, Poland), and deeply loved her hometown. Her parents were Russian immigrants, Klemens Schapiro and Rose Rakovschchik Schapiro. Her father owned a lumberyard and her mother was a homemaker. In 1933, the Nazi Party won political majority in the region Klement lived in. In 1935, the Nuremberg Race Laws were passed, legally declaring Jewish people as different from non-Jewish people. Jewish people now had to follow specific laws, such as giving their children Jewish names from a government approved list, invalidating their German passports, and forcing them to wear the six-pointed yellow star. In 1938, the Nazis siezed the Schapiro's lumberyard and Klement's father fled the city. The Gestapo then broke into Klement's family apartment, prompting Klement, her brother, and her mother to flee to a cousin's home and apply for exit visas. The experience of the Gestapo breaking into their home was extremely traumatic for young Klement, who was then around nine years old. Klement completed an oral history for the Smithsonian in 2015, and on recounting this experience she said, "'I [still] occasionally have dreams of someone breaking into a window or a door.'"

In 1938 on November 9th and 10th, a series of Nazi orchestrated pogroms occurred, encouraging vandalism and destruction of Jewish- owned businesses, homes, and synagogues. This event is now called the Night of Broken Glass, or *Kristallnacht*. Klement wrote about her experience of *Kristallnacht* in her memoir, *Blunt Edge*: "We heard screaming from the street below ... flames and smoke surged from the synagogue across the street, heating the windows of our cousins' apartment. We stood back, in fear of being seen from below as our pink temple burned." The Schapiro's received their exit visas after *Kristallnacht*. As they were preparing to leave, they learned the Gestapo were waiting for them, so they fled Zoppot, reunited with Klement's father, and boarded an ocean liner for Manhattan in the United States. Being forced to leave her hometown and become a refugee was a traumatic experience which Klement never forgot.

## Klement as Artist

By 1938, Klement and her family settled into life in Manhattan, New York. At the age of eleven, her father gave her a set of watercolors and began to teach her to paint. She attended a high school dedicated to the arts and after graduating earned a two-year certificate from the School of Art at The Cooper Union.

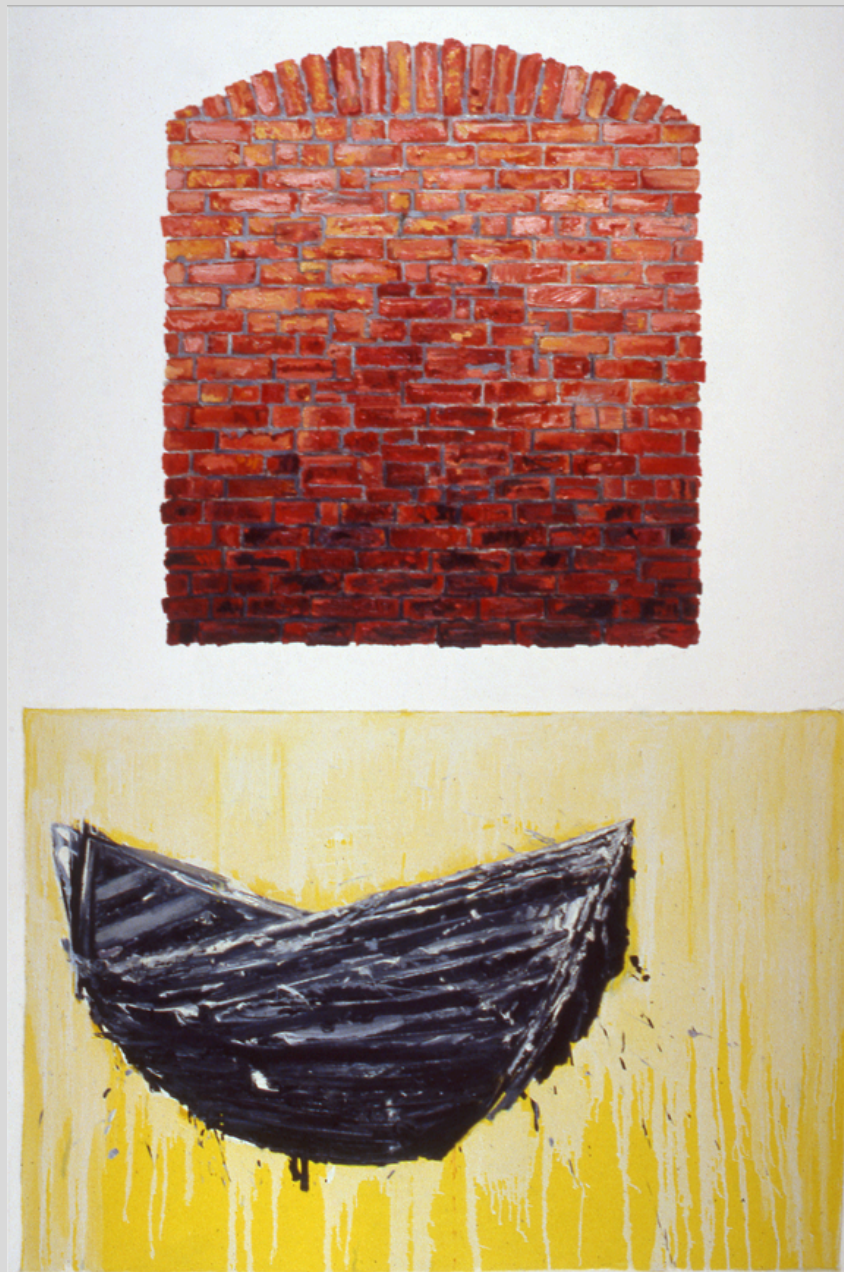
Abstract Expressionism, considered to be the first truly American art movement, was exploding just as she graduated with her certificate. Aspects of this movement, such as Action Painting - a style of painting where paint is splashed, dripped, and smeared across the canvas, allowing randomness to become a part of the artwork - were incorporated in Klement's lifelong practice.

Klement soon moved to Chicago, IL with her then husband and young son, and eventually began to teach at the University of Chicago, where she worked until her retirement.

Klement's artwork is usually large and often involves two canvases or sheets of paper. The subjects might not seem related, but to Klement they of course are. The subjects she paints often come out of a field of white, suggesting isolation. Her themes often explore loneliness or persecution; the Holocaust, the massacres of the indigenous peoples of North America, an individual's exile. Klement was also inspired by music and literature, including works by other Jewish artists and their responses to the Holocaust. After being forced to flee Nazi persecution at a young age, growing up with the knowledge of what happened during the Holocaust, Klement explored the ideas of identity and loss for the rest of her life.

*...From the beginning I experienced a sense of duality the bright light and rhythmic pounding of the sea, and there, rising behind it, the dark forest that held in its silence the northern European legends of evil spirits: witches, erlkings and poison toadstools. Light and dark - good and evil - life and death - that juxtaposition that eventually became the underpinning of my painting..."*





Vera Klement, *Lifeboat*, oil on canvas, 1998, [2021.29.4](#)

In this piece, Klement memorializes the Holocaust and her family's experience when they fled across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States. She juxtaposes two realities with the objects in the painting: a heavy brick form on the top symbolizing confinement or perhaps part of a chimney from a concentration camp, and on the bottom a lifeboat representing a journey to safety. She mourns the loss of millions in the Shoah but rejoices in the lives that were saved.





Vera Klement, *The East was Red with Cockrow*, oil and wax on canvas, 1999, [2012.98.1](#)

“The eight-foot canvas lies on the floor. I throw speckled spirals of blood-red paint across the top of the white canvas- the red of the Eastern sky- and within that splatter, out of the spots and the dots, I encourage the image of a red rooster to coalesce- a rooster with a glaring green eye.

I had thought that the red rooster crowing in the red light of dawn was Nelly Sach’ metaphor for the Holocaust- her invention. But I learned that it had an older history- it was code- a warning to Jews in the shtetls- of a coming pogrom.

On the lower half of the canvas I place a starker image, an upended iron washbucket – a vessel whose function is to amplify the sound of the rooster’s message.

For the second canvas, the same height of eight feet but only twelve inches wide, I paint eight small landscapes that form progression in time from daytime fields to russet sunset, then to night- the last one severely reduced to black and gray- a bleak division of sky and land in homage to the late Rothko paintings, in which he had anticipated his own death. I imagine the sound of that death amplified by the washbucket, resounding over the fields and hills. I glue the small landscapes to the narrow stretcher.”

This artwork was inspired by Nelly Sachs’ poem *The Terror*.

# Prompt

As you consider your entry for the Henry Pestka Art and Poetry Contest, first remember that the Holocaust was a real experience; millions of people, both Jewish and non-Jewish, died due to government policy. We honor the survivors, and do not want to trivialize their experiences, even unintentionally. As you think about your poem or art piece, remember that your piece should be respectful of those real experiences.

Vera Klement uses two or more images as symbols to represent a concept, and uses empty space or a single color around those images to create an emotional response. As you study the history of the Holocaust, what symbols stand out to you? How can you create a respectful work that combines these symbols in a simple but meaningful way?









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