Lee Krasner began her serious involvement with abstraction at New York's Hofmann School of Fine Arts in 1937. There she developed a formal vocabulary that she sustained for much of her career. Hans Hofmann's impact can be measured in Krasner's angular charcoal drawings of the nude that she produced in his class (Fig. 1), and in her vivid still-life compositions from that period.

Another student at the Hofmann School was Mercedes Carles (later Matter; 1913-2001). While Krasner explored the dynamism of bodies thrusting in space, Carles had a bold but more static response to the male and female nudes they sketched in Hofmann's class. Both young women shared a passionate interest in the burgeoning involvement with abstraction among New York artists in the 1930s.

Krasner and Carles had first crossed paths on December 2, 1936, under most unusual circumstances: they met in jail. For these two young women artists from completely dissimilar backgrounds—two different worlds—an unlikely friendship followed.¹

An American-born child of a Russian immigrant family, Krasner was a product of the Brooklyn public school system and the tuition-free Woman's Art School of The Cooper Union (1926-28) before studying at the Arts Students League (1928), and the National Academy of Design (1928-1932). Her determination is evident in two early self portraits, one painted in the basement of her parent's house in Brooklyn (1929; Fig 2), and the one made to fulfill a requirement for her promotion to the Academy's "Life Drawing" class (see p. 30, Fig. 2).² Krasner was active in the Artists Union and a frequent participant in artists' protests. She believed, like Trotsky, that artists could create abstract work and that art radicals should be more concerned with a better world than with making propaganda. After working for the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) for several months in 1934, the following year Krasner became an assistant in the Mural Division of the Federal Art Project (FAP), which was part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

Mercedes Carles was a privileged child of the Philadelphia artist Arthur B. Carles and Mercedes de Cordoba, a musician, actress, and sometime model for Edward Steichen and other members of the Photo Secession group. (In 1921 the family lived for a year in Steichen's home in the village of Voulangis, outside Paris.)³ The beautiful, dark-haired "Mercy" lived mostly with her mother and was educated in private schools in the United States and Europe. She began painting at an early age, and after 1926 she visited her father in Philadelphia, and spent the rest of the year in New York City and abroad.⁴ In the summer of 1932 Mercedes Carles studied with Alexander Archipenko in Woodstock, New York,⁵ and then began taking classes at the Art Students League, where she first encountered Hans Hofmann, a German artist who had just emigrated to the United States. By 1933 she was enrolled in his evening painting course, and soon after began an affair with Hofmann, who was living in America without his wife. He became Carles's mentor and father figure as well as her lover. The following year, Carles joined Hofmann and her father in Gloucester, Massachusetts, where the two men were teaching a summer course.⁶ Carles had not seen her father for several years, and the sojourn was an occasion to present herself to him as a young woman and aspiring modernist painter (Fig. 3).
By 1936 she was working on the WPA/FAP mural project, and she was present on December 2 of that year when a protest took place—one of the many during that period—over the sudden discharge of five hundred WPA artists and models who were supposed to have been employed that week. Among the crowd outside the WPA Arts Building at 6 East 39 Street were hundreds of screaming artists and models. Police battled with the rioters, resulting in injuries to fifty people and the arrest of more than two hundred for disorderly conduct. Decades later, Mercedes Carles Matter recalled the day:

I met Lee Krasner in jail. I was on the WPA, and I was seeing a lot of [Arshile] Gorky at the time and he wanted to educate me because I was from finishing schools, and knew nothing about politics. So he brought me a whole library of communist literature. Then I was on the WPA and hired a model and she said she couldn't pose for me because she was going to a meeting at the Artists' Union. So I decided to go to see what it was like. They were all fired up.... They were going to have a sit-down strike, so they all rushed from the Artists' Union up to the [WPA] headquarters. I rushed over to Gorky's studio and told him to come. He stayed home and I ended up in jail. I was just an observer. I landed in jail and Lee Krasner was there and that's how we first met.

It was not Krasner's first such experience. She later recalled: "I was practically in every jail in New York City. Each time we were fired, or threatened with being fired, we'd go out and picket. On many occasions we'd be taken off in a Black Maria and locked in a cell."

Krasner's friendship with Mercedes Carles, their links to artists of the Hofmann School and the American Abstract Artists, and their art of the 1930s and early 1940s are illuminated by unpublished letters from Krasner to Carles and by the latter's unpublished autobiographical essay, written in the seventies. These documents provide insights not only to changes in Krasner's approach to abstraction but to connections between her personal life and her artistic trajectory.

Mercedes Carles considered Lee Krasner among her closest friends in the 1930s and into the 1940s. Their association probably led to Krasner's enrollment at Hofmann's school in 1937. "I couldn't afford my own model and the school was right there, a block away from where I lived," she said later. In Hofmann's studio, Krasner had an introduction to the European avant-garde and learned about advanced modernism. Hofmann had known Henri Matisse and Picasso in Paris, and had taught in Munich before coming to the United States. His teaching often was gender-biased, and even his personal letters to Mercedes, his erstwhile lover, were patronizing, as he remarked about his interest in "the reputation of his girl students."

Krasner respected Hofmann and considered his instruction essential to her development as an artist, but she resented his practice of drawing corrections directly on his students' work, ripping their drawings into pieces, and other manifestations of his rigid and aggressive teaching methods. His emphasis on negative and positive space and on circular and rectangular motion is evident in her drawings of the time, such as the Nude Study from Life (Fig. 1). Krasner's untitled still life (1938; Pl. 10), in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, shows the interaction of color and form that resulted from her study with Hofmann. In it, Krasner eliminated the outline and constructed the composition of vivid hues that form shapes loosely related to one another. She retained a suggestion of a receding table top, and realized Hofmann's "push-pull" dictum with color. Hofmann taught his students that colors interact in a way that could be understood abstractly, and these mosaic-like...
dabs and patches forecast Krasner’s later creation of mosaic tables and her continuing interest in fauvist color passages on a white ground. A comparison with Carles’s Tabletop Still Life no. 5 of the same year (1938; Pl. 11) demonstrates how Krasner had boldly abandoned discrete outlines of specific objects for sweeping curves and broadly-brushed passages of vivid colors, while Carles had moved from small, tight, heavily worked sections to more freely brushed areas.

Hofmann taught the importance of gesture and the dynamic movement of form, and his best students moved beyond cubism to unified compositions that provoke multiple readings. Some of Hofmann’s students actually produced works more advanced than their instructor’s by the end of the 1930s. Krasner and Carles also promoted his success by arranging exhibitions and sales of his paintings in the 1940s.

Many factors led to Krasner’s individualized approach to abstraction. Among these were her friendships with Willem de Kooning and Arshile Gorky, her conversations about art with Harold Rosenberg, and her relationship with the artist Igor Pantuhoff, who worked in a conservative style but gave Krasner books on Matisse, Picasso, and Raoul Dufy. In addition, 1936 and 1937 were eventful years in New York, with two major exhibitions organized by the Museum of Modern Art: “Cubism and Abstract Art,” followed by “Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism.” Both featured primarily European modernists, with a few Americans such as Alexander Calder. These exhibitions had a profound effect on young American artists seeking to work in an abstract mode, whether geometric or biomorphic.

It was probably through Carles that Krasner became involved with the American Abstract Artists (AAA) group. In 1936 Mercedes Jeanne Carles (as she was called at the time) became a founding member of the AAA, exhibiting with the group until 1942. She later noted, “As in my case, the majority of its members had been students of Hofmann.” Other women artists working in progressive styles who joined the AAA in the 1930s included Gertrude Greene (1904-56), Alice Trumbull Mason (1904-71), Esphyr Slobodkina (1908-2002), and Rosalind Bengelsdorf (1916-79). Although Carles exhibited with the group, her paintings (for example Pl. 12), do not indicate a similar acceptance of abstraction. One of her untitled still life paintings was reproduced in the 1938 AAA yearbook, and the following year “Jeanne Carles” was listed as a member of the group but did not have an image reproduced in the yearbook. She seems to have lost interest in the group as her relationship with Herbert Matter, the Swiss-born designer and photographer, deepened. They were married in 1941.

Krasner’s energetic paintings of the period featured a geometric clarity, vivid palette, and elegant line that was indebted to such European modernists as Matisse and Piet Mondrian. While accepting the official AAA aesthetic philosophy, emphasizing abstraction, Krasner nevertheless followed her own creative trajectory that led in the late 1930s to sophisticated renditions of synthetic cubism. Krasner exhibited with the AAA from 1939 through 1943, showing exuberant abstract compositions that often surpassed those of the other accomplished female members of that group.

While active with the AAA, Krasner met Mondrian, whose principles of Neo-Plasticism certainly had an effect on her work. She even danced with the artist at the Café Society Uptown, later recalling, “I loved jazz and he loved jazz, so I saw him several times and we went dancing like crazy.” She also escorted Mondrian through an AAA Annual exhibition at the Riverside Museum, where, upon seeing her painting in the show, he apparently complimented her “strong inner rhythm.” Hofmann, who praised Mondrian, calling him “the architect of modern painting,” demonstrated in his classes how he condensed and abstracted nature.

Krasner made compositions in the early 1940s that demonstrate her admiration for Mondrian in their use of geometric elements. The AAA considered “abstraction” to apply to all works by artists who recognized that color, form, and composition have qualities in and of themselves. As a result, hard-edge geometric works hung alongside biomorphic paintings. Krasner’s abstractions typically were derived from the traditional still-life set up, as found at the Hofmann School. Works such as her Abstract Human Figure (1938; Fig. 4) and an untitled still life (1942; Fig. 5) feature brilliant hues, varieties of textures, thick lines, and no overlapping of forms as part of her sustained involvement with abstraction. Whether or not they are hybrids of still life and human figure, as Robert Hobbs has suggested, her emphasis is on the independence of color and form as separate from description.

By 1939 Krasner was appointed to the Executive Board of
the Artists Union. As she later explained, “My experience with leftist movements in the late 1930s made me move as far away from them as possible... They weren't interested in an independent and experimental art, but rather linked it to their economic and political program.”

When in January 1942, Krasner exhibited an abstract composition in “French and American Painting” at the McMillen Gallery on East 56 Street, organized by John Graham, she considered this a pivotal moment in her career. Her work appeared with such European masters as Matisse and Picasso, but also with de Kooning, Stuart Davis, and Jackson Pollock. This was her first meeting with Pollock, and later that year, they began living together. Now a successful abstract artist, she transferred her efforts from the WPA/FAP to the War Services Office, where she managed to employ Pollock on the display she was supervising.

Krasner was determined to secure art world connections for Pollock, later telling an interviewer:

When I met Pollock and responded to his work the way I did, which was very enthusiastic, I certainly brought people in that I knew to see his work. Through Herbert and Mercedes Carles Matter, who were close friends of mine at the time, we got Sandy [Alexander] Calder in to see his work, we got James Johnson Sweeney in to see his work.

Unlike Eva Hesse and many other twentieth-century women artists, Lee Krasner left few writings; however, letters she exchanged with Mercedes Carles Matter reveal her state of mind in the 1940s. From her home at 46 East 8 Street, probably in 1944, Krasner wrote to her friend, who had moved to Santa Monica, California, with her husband the previous year:

Dear Carles. If it’s any consolation, to you, we miss you and Herbert as much as you miss us. It’s hard for me to realize that you are 3000 miles away. I keep thinking that you’re on some prolonged vacation and Herbert is just too busy to see anyone. Your shack sounds wonderful and I really wish I was there—however don’t start getting ideas—I just don’t like the sound of California—but the waves and the aloneness that kind of aloneness, seems wonderful—the fact that you can think about painting again and be away from the hysteria of the city—all that I envy.

In the same letter, she describes how she and Pollock helped to arrange a show for Hans Hofmann at Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century Gallery.

I was pretty busy arranging a little dinner party... The dinner was a complete success... Yes, I’m cooking these days—seriously. As I was saying after a most charming dinner we all went to Hans’s place to show Peggy his work—now mind this business of casually walking down four flights at 46 East 8th and walking up three flights at 44 East 8th. Took all winter to plot—nothing must go wrong. However the gods had destined a successful evening and Peggy was terribly excited about the work and asked if she couldn’t come up and see them quietly, and to sum up she’s giving Hans a show this March.

Sidney Janis illustrated Krasner’s Composition (c. 1939; Pl. 13) now at the Smithsonian American Art Museum) in the catalogue for his pioneering exhibition in 1943, Abstract and Surrealist Art in America. Her inclusion in both John Graham’s 1942 group exhibition and a catalogue of the most advanced art in the United States signaled her growing recognition in the art world.

Pollock’s first solo exhibition was held November 9-27, 1943, at Art of This Century Gallery. Howard Putzel, Peggy Guggenheim’s assistant, was instrumental in bringing notice to Pollock’s work and was attentive to both Krasner and Pollock. However, Krasner soon was struggling with her own work—trying to “lose Cubism” and “absorb Pollock.” After the vivid and forceful abstractions that she had created, her painting faltered as she devoted more attention to advancing Pollock’s career. She wrote to Mercedes in 1944, “I’m painting and nothing happens. It’s maddening. I showed [Sidney] Janis my last three paintings. He said they were too much Pollock—it’s completely idiotic, but I have a feeling from now on that’s going to be the story. As I said, I envied you your aloneness and the waves. Good night and my love to Herbert.”

Krasner and Pollock had decided to leave Manhattan, and in 1944 they spent several months at the Springs, a small fishing village in the town of East Hampton, Long Island, on the Atlantic Ocean. There she experienced for herself “the waves” and the proximity to nature that she envied as an escape from

Krasner went on to write that Pollock’s work would be shown at the San Francisco Museum “in a month or so.”

Many authors have noted that Krasner’s exposure to Pollock’s dynamic painting caused her to falter in her own artistic development. But the death of her father and its devastating impact on her psyche has been insufficiently acknowledged as another source of her inability to complete a work at that time. After her father’s death, Krasner changed her mind about not needing to be married to Pollock, and they were married on October 25, 1945. The following spring, Krasner set up her easel in the back bedroom of their house on Fireplace Road in the Springs and began her Little Image paintings. She initiated a new chapter in her quest for a personal style.

Krasner met Jackson Pollock at a time when she was considered a formidable, well-connected young modernist. Her negotiation with abstraction in the 1930s and early 1940s situates her among the avant-garde American artists of that period. Her trajectory, which had soared before Pollock, resumed in the 1950s.

Mercedes Matter warrants more attention. Often overshadowed by artists she energetically championed during her lifetime, she is among a group of women artists identified with the New York School who have yet to be fully recognized for their achievements.

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Notes
1. My thanks to the estate of Mercedes Carles Matter and the Mark Borghi Gallery for making available to me unpublished archival materials on Matter, Lee Krasner, and Hans Hofmann.
2. John Russell, “Art: Self-Portraits at Long Island’s Heckscher,” New York Times (July 13, 1979). Although she was emulated by the Life Class Committee, which did not believe that her self-image was painted outdoors, critics have noted the honesty and tenacity of this painting. Ellen Landau writes of the self portrait holding a flower, that it “is closest to the style of her National Academy of Design teachers Leon Kroll and Charles Courtney Curran”; Ellen G. Landau, Lee Krasner, A Catalogue Raisonné (New York, Harry Abrams, 1999), 25.
7. Taped interview of Jeffrey Potter with Mercedes and Herbert Matter, July 6, 1982, on deposit at the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, East Hampton, New York.
14. The General Prospectus of the American Abstract Artists of 1936 includes a statement on the Character of the Group: “We believe that a new art form has been established which is definite enough in character to demand this unified effort. We recognize, however, the need for individuals to experiment and deviate at times from what may seem established directions. For this reason we place a liberal interpretation upon the word ‘abstract’, a word which we moreover recognize as neither adequate nor accurate.” (Quoted in Abstraction across America, 1934-1946 (New York: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 1996).
16. Ibid.
20. Interview with Lee Krasner by Doris Holmes, 1972, transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
22. Ibid.
23. Sidney Janis, Abstract and Surrealist Art in America (New York: Arno Press, 1943), 55, fig. 31. The exhibition was held in New York at the Mortimer Brandt Gallery in January, 1944, and was also shown in Cincinnati, Denver, Seattle, Santa Barbara, and San Francisco.

Pl. 11. Mercedes Matter, Tabletop Still Life no. 5 (1937-38), oil on canvas, 30" x 36". Private collection. Photo courtesy Mark Borghi Gallery.
Pl. 12. Mercedes Carles (Matter)
Untitled (1934-35),
oil on canvas board, 16" x 20".
Private collection.
Photo courtesy Mark Borghi Gallery.

Pl. 13. Lee Krasner,
Composition (c. 1939)
oil on linen, 30" x 24".
Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Washington, D. C.
Photo courtesy Robert Miller Gallery.
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