



# Alice Neel: People Come First

March 12 – July 10, 2022

**Alice Neel's Exclusive West Coast Presentation Comes to the de Young Museum**

*"For me, people come first. I have tried to assert the dignity and eternal importance of the human being."*  
– Alice Neel

**SAN FRANCISCO** – The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco are proud to present the first comprehensive museum survey of work by American artist Alice Neel (1900–1984) on the West Coast. This retrospective positions Neel as one of the 20th century's most radical painters—one who championed social justice and held a long-standing commitment to humanist principles that inspired both her art and her life. Featuring a multitude of Neel's paintings, drawings, and watercolors, as well as a rarely seen film unique to the de Young

museum's presentation, the de Young is the only West Coast venue for this revolutionary exhibition.

"Though Alice Neel called New York City home, much of her persona and art, overflowing with uncompromising humanism and regard for all people, aligns deeply with the spirit of San Francisco," stated Thomas P. Campbell, Director and CEO of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. "Neel visited the city a few times in her lifetime, creating a number of works which will be on view in our presentation at the de Young. It is with much delight that we welcome Neel back to the Bay Area through her resounding paintings."

This exhibition spans the entirety of Neel's career, from her professional debut in Cuba in the 1920s and her work as part of the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s; through her commitment to centering the figure at a time when abstraction was ascendant, in the 1940s and 1950s; her resurgence in the 1960s and 1970s; and the emergence of her "late style" in the 1980s. Besides foregrounding her often under-recognized artistic accomplishments, *Alice Neel: People Come First* presents Neel as an artist who engaged with progressive politics throughout her lifetime.

Neel spent the majority of her life in New York City, where she painted countless depictions of the diverse, resilient, and passionate people she encountered. The exhibition includes portraits of Feminist, Civil Rights, and political leaders, activists, queer cultural figures, mothers, visibly pregnant women, musicians, nude figures, and many others, all of which illuminate Neel's profound humanist principles.

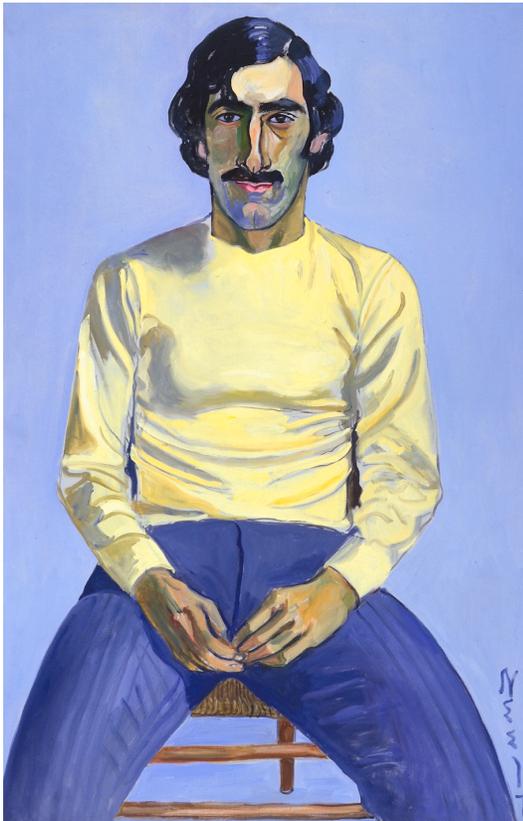
"Alice Neel dedicated her practice to portraying both people and moments in life that have often been erased or forgotten through time," says Lauren Palmor, Assistant Curator of American Art at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. "Whether portraying the strength and struggles of her neighbors in Spanish Harlem, the labors of pregnancy and motherhood, or a generation of creatives devastated by the AIDS crisis, her works are unflinching in their honesty and radical in their interpretation."

The exhibition's presentation at the de Young will be divided into nine sections, drawing upon seven decades of Neel's output. Working in a range of genres, the artist considered her "pictures of people" to be historical records of the time in which they were made. The exhibition also includes her accomplishments in other styles, specifically still lifes, landscapes, and cityscapes.

The de Young's presentation will also include a small interlude dedicated to Neel and San Francisco. Neel made two trips to the city to visit her son Hartley in 1967 and 1969. Hartley was then living with his future wife, Ginny, who assisted Neel with stretching canvases during her visits. It was during this time that Neel produced a piece titled *Ginny in Blue Shirt* (1969). In

dialogue with the finished work will be a rarely seen silent film showing Neel in the process of painting *Ginny in Blue Shirt*, captured by her son Hartley. Also distinct to the de Young's presentation are select works by Neel juxtaposed with works drawn from the collections of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, including those by artists whom Neel herself admired.

*Alice Neel: People Come First* will be on view from March 12 through July 10, 2022, at the de Young museum in San Francisco. The exhibition was co-curated by Kelly Baum, the Cynthia Hazen Polsky and Leon Polsky Curator of Contemporary Art, and Randall Griffey, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The de Young's presentation is coordinated by Lauren Palmor, Assistant Curator of American Art, at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.



#### In Detail

The exhibition starts by chronicling Alice Neel's longtime home of New York City, where she began living and working in 1927. "**New York City**" explores Neel's engagement with the architecture, inhabitants, and public spaces of the city, including views of Spanish Harlem, Central Park, and the subways and elevated trains that defined the urban landscape of the time. In the right corner, two separate protest scenes decrying Nazism and the execution of Willie McGee showcase Neel's early activism. Neel's experiences in New York in the 1930s and early 1940s, during which she was a member of the Federal Art Project, cemented her interest in "bearing witness"—that is, in documenting the people and places around her.

"**Counter/Culture**," the largest section within the exhibition, is devoted to the many bohemians, dissidents, and activists whom Neel painted (and with whom she frequently collaborated) over the course of her life.

Grouped thematically, these paintings map her various social causes and associations, from playwrights and activists to queer performers and leaders of the feminist and civil rights movements. In this section, the Fine Arts Museums' painting *Robert Avedis Hagopian* (1971) celebrates the beloved local San Francisco concert pianist Robert Avedis Hagopian (1945–1984), who died from complications of HIV/AIDS. Together these paintings not only testify to the spirit of human rebellion but also speak to Neel's own determination to break decisively with convention, both artistic and personal.

The gallery entitled “**The Human Comedy**” derives from the work of French novelist and playwright Honoré de Balzac, a name Neel invoked on more than one occasion. It displays some of Neel's most heartbreaking drawings and paintings, including those of city hospitals and suicide wards. For Neel, the human condition was a source of constant inspiration, and she devoted herself to documenting instances of pain and suffering, endurance and resilience. Neel's interest in these subjects is on full view in *The Fuller Brush Man* (1965), a depiction of Dewald Strauss, a salesman for the Fuller Brush Company who, after surviving Dachau and escaping Nazi Germany, heroically enlisted in the US Army. He earned a Purple Heart for his service after he returned to Europe and fought in the Battle of the Bulge.

“**Alice Neel and Art History**” features select works by Neel juxtaposed with objects drawn from the collections of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Bay Area artists featured in this section include Imogen Cunningham and Richard Diebenkorn. This section shines a light on the myriad ways the artist intersected with and also diverged from art historical precedent. At the end of this gallery, visitors encounter the San Francisco interlude mentioned earlier in the release featuring *Ginny in Blue Shirt* (1969), a portrait of Neel's future daughter-in-law, Ginny Neel, which was painted in San Francisco during Neel's extended two-month stay in San Francisco in 1969. The painting is on view beside a rarely seen silent film, captured by her son Hartley, depicting Neel in the process of painting this work, which is unique to the de Young's presentation.

The next two sections, “**Home**” and “**Motherhood**,” focus on many of Neel's paintings and drawings of intimate spaces and personal moments as a mother, lover, and artist. In “Home,” paintings and drawings of domestic spaces, mostly her own apartments, feature her still lifes, full of drama and character, as well as a group of works depicting her lovers in moments of intimacy. “Motherhood” presents a survey of mothers both pre- and postpartum, all of them remarkable for their candor, shining a light on that most taxing and most complex of female experiences. Together these sections highlight Neel's inextricable dual identities as both a mother and an artist.

“**The Nude**” presents some of Neel's most provocative, groundbreaking nudes, including the artist's own nude self-portrait, rendered when she was eighty years old. The exhibition concludes with “**Good Abstract Qualities**,” exploring works that demonstrate Neel's avid experimentation with structure, technique, and abstraction. This last section highlights Neel's formal innovations, drawing particular attention to her embrace of “unfinishedness,” as in *Black Draftee (James Hunter)*, a 1965 portrait featuring a draftee of the Vietnam War scheduled to leave for duty in a week. Hunter was scheduled to return for a second sitting, but when he did not show, Neel declared the work complete in its unfinished state by signing it on the back. These works, both aesthetic and allegorical, function as a metaphor for becoming and un-becoming, beginnings and ends, life and death.

Finally, inside the de Young's Media Room, two short films play on a loop, highlighting Neel's dynamic and witty personality. These two films include Neel's sparkling February 1984 appearance on the *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* as well as an excerpt from the documentary *They Are Their Own Gifts* (1978, directed by Lucille Rhodes and Margaret Murphy), providing an immersion into Neel's working methods and philosophical outlook.

### About Alice Neel

Alice Hartley Neel (1900–1984) is widely considered one of the twentieth century's foremost artists, whose expressive practice represented the people she knew and the worlds she inhabited. Born to a middle-class family in the Philadelphia suburb of Merion Square, Pennsylvania, she studied at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women (now the Moore College of Art and Design). Neel came to reject the impressionist style favored by her instructors, gravitating instead towards the teachings of Robert Henri and the influence of the larger Ashcan School of realism, which addressed such subjects as urban poverty and the vitality of the working class. Neel's nascent humanism was further shaped by a formative sojourn in Havana, Cuba, where she began to see art as a political act.

Neel moved to New York City in 1927, where she would continue to live and work for most of her life. She spent some early formative years in Greenwich Village, then the city's epicenter of bohemian culture and progressive politics. There she entered the employment of the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) easel division and engaged with the Communist Party, remaining committed to its ideals and loyal to its champions throughout her lifetime. In 1938, Neel settled in Spanish Harlem, where she faithfully recorded the dynamism and diversity of her neighborhood. In 1975, when explaining her move from Greenwich Village to Spanish Harlem, Neel told an interviewer that she "found more truth in Spanish Harlem [...] than there is in all these festival places." Her "pictures of people" from this period reflect the richness she saw in the community, sensitively capturing the tapestries of emotion and experience she observed in those who were otherwise overlooked by the art establishment of the time.

Neel's subject matter expanded after moving to the Upper West Side in 1962, when she began to include more leaders in the civil rights and feminist movements in her portrait practice. Working in what would be her final residence and studio, Neel also increasingly painted more artists, curators, and other cultural figures, a development that coincided with the artist's growing visibility and notoriety. During the 1960s and 1970s, at a time when the women's movement and the feminist art movement introduced new audiences to Neel's radical vision, she began to receive the outpouring of recognition she was earlier denied.

Decades of balancing her progressive politics with the demands of being an artist and mother further sensitized Neel to the subjects she painted, and she adhered to an intimate and forthright form of portraiture at a time when the dominant trends in

art renounced figuration. Neel called herself a “collector of souls,” a phrase that encapsulates her ability to reflect her sitters as well as the era in which they lived.

She later described, “If I have any talent in relation to people, apart from planning the whole canvas, it is my identification with them. I get so identified when I paint them, when they go home I feel frightful. I have no self-I’ve gone into this other person. And by doing that, there’s a kind of something I get that other artists don’t get.” Neel’s radical empathy and progressive politics are reflected in a body of work that reflects the cultural shifts of the twentieth century, and her riveting documents of American life testify to her humanity, her sense of justice, and her continued relevance to contemporary museum audiences.

**[Media Image gallery](#)**

[deyoungmuseum.org](http://deyoungmuseum.org) \ [@deyoungmuseum](https://twitter.com/deyoungmuseum)

**Public Programs**

**“Alice Neel: People Come First”: Opening Day Celebration + Free Exhibition Entry**

Saturday, Mar 12, 2022 \ de Young, Whole Building, 1-4pm

Help us celebrate the art and legacy of American artist Alice Neel. This day-long celebration includes a conversation and in-depth look at the making of the exhibition and the artist’s life, family art-making activities, and live music performances.

*Alice Neel: People Come First* tickets will be free on this day, on a first-come, first-serve basis, onsite only. Limit 4 per family, space is limited. Free admission to *Alice Neel: People Come First* is generously underwritten by Gucci.

**“Alice Neel”: Film Screening + Q&A with Andrew Neel**

Saturday, April 9, 2022, \ 1 pm, Koret Auditorium

Filmmaker Andrew Neel, Alice Neel’s grandson, puts together the pieces of the painter’s life using intimate one-on-one interviews with Neel’s surviving family and personal archival video. The documentary explores the artist’s tumultuous biography and the legacy of Alice Neel’s determination to paint her era. The film screening will be followed by a Q+A with Andrew Neel.

**A Conversation on Alice Neel, Art, and, Motherhood**

Wednesday, May 4, 2022, \ 5 pm, YouTube

A cross-disciplinary conversation including voices from art, design, feminist journalism, and the birthing community addressing contemporary motherhood through the lens of Neel's images of pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum.

**"Giving my Father Back His Name": Talk and Book Signing with Jerry Strauss**

Saturday, May 21, 2022 \ 1 pm, Koret Auditorium

This talk will shed light on and celebrate the life of Dewald Strauss, commemorated by Neel's "Fuller Brush Man." A true story of the author's father, a Holocaust survivor and door-to-door salesman, and Alice Neel, the great American portrait artist.

**A Journey of Sharing Kindness and Human Connection, with Sylvia Boorstein**

Saturday, June 11, 2022 \ 1 pm, Piazzoni Murals Room

Join us for a guided workshop with psychotherapist and Buddhist teacher, Sylvia Boorstein on how we can "boundlessly open our hearts" towards all beings and how we can put people first as Alice Neel believed.

*For more information and updates on other upcoming events, please visit [deyoung.famsf.org](http://deyoung.famsf.org).*

**Exhibition Organization**

The exhibition was organized by The Metropolitan Museum of Art in association with the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao and The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Presenting Sponsor: Diane B. Wilsey. Major Support: The Herbst Foundation, Inc., Jason E. Moment, Dagmar Dolby. Significant Support: Gucci. Generous Support :Juliet de Baubigny, Lorna Meyer Calas and Dennis Calas, The Harris Family, Phillips. Additional Support Wanda Kownacki.

### **Visiting \ de Young**

The de Young Museum is open Tue - Sun 9.30 am - 5.15 pm. For more information, please visit [deyoungmuseum.org](http://deyoungmuseum.org).

### **About the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco**

The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco oversee the de Young museum, located in Golden Gate Park, and the Legion of Honor, in Lincoln Park. It is the largest public arts institution in San Francisco, and one of the most visited arts institutions in the United States.

The de Young originated from the 1894 California Midwinter International Exposition in Golden Gate Park and was established as the Memorial Museum in 1895. It was later renamed in honor of Michael H. de Young, who spearheaded its creation. The present copper-clad landmark building, designed by Herzog & de Meuron, opened in October 2005. Reflecting an active conversation among cultures, perspectives, and time periods, the collections on view include American painting, sculpture, and decorative arts from the 17th to the 21st centuries; arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas; costume and textile arts; and international modern and contemporary art.

Image credits: Alice Neel, "Jackie Curtis and Ritta Redd", 1970. Oil on canvas; framed: 154.3 x 108.9 cm (60 3/4 x 42 7/8 in.); unframed: 152.4 x 106.4 cm (60 x 41 7/8 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr. Fund 2009.345 © The Estate of Alice Neel. © The Estate of Alice Neel. Image courtesy the Cleveland Museum of Art.; NEW YORK, NY - CIRCA 1980: Artist Alice Neel in front of a self portrait circa 1980 in New York City. Photo by Sonia Moskowitz / IMAGES / Getty Images; Alice Neel, "The Spanish Family", 1943, Oil on canvas, 34 x 28 in. (86.4 x 71.1 cm), © The Estate of Alice Neel. © The Estate of Alice Neel. Image courtesy David Zwirner; Alice Neel, "Robert Avedis Hagopian", 1971, Oil on canvas, 46 x 29 3/4 in. (116.8 x 75.6 cm), Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Gift of Richard H. and Beatrice Hagopian in memory of their son, Robert, 1993.17, © The Estate of Alice Neel. © The Estate of Alice Neel. Image courtesy the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco