



**KARL NEUROTH**

# PREFACE

It has been a great pleasure to put together this exhibition of Karl Neuroth's paintings for the Linder Gallery at Keystone College, the institution Neuroth served for forty years and where he established the very highly respected program in fine arts. As an educator, division chairperson, gallery director, and in so many other roles he filled over the years, Karl embodied the excellence that is Keystone College. As a painter whose work continues to evolve in new and sometimes surprising directions, he represents all that is excellent in contemporary art. This exhibition is a celebration of his many contributions to education and the arts, and inaugurates the 2005–2006 exhibition series for the Linder Gallery.

It is fitting that the exhibit coincides, coincidentally (but almost precisely), with the centennial anniversary of the famous Salon d'Automne of 1905, the Paris exhibit that began the Fauve revolution in painting. It was there that the critic Louis Vauxcelles, aghast at the intensely colored and unmodulated paintings of Matisse, Derain, Vlaminck, and others, found refuge in a series of academic sculptures and declared, "*Donatello chez les fauves!*" (Donatello among the wild beasts!). This was, as one

textbook claims, perhaps the most celebrated baptism of twentieth-century art,<sup>1</sup> a shot of pattern and color heard round the world.

If it is difficult today to imagine how anyone could describe these artists as wild beasts, it is even more inconceivable to apply this moniker to Karl Neuroth. But in Fauvism, and especially in the paintings of Matisse, we find perhaps the closest precedent for his art. "Pattern and color" are the words Karl invariably uses in discussing his work, and those same terms just as accurately apply to descriptions of Matisse and the Fauves.

But the comparison goes beyond a similarity of style. Erika Funke, in her essay for this catalogue, writes eloquently of Karl's art with respect to his German heritage, and specifically to the influence of his grandfather, Johann Otto Neuroth. She describes the meticulous skill involved in Johann's work as a painter of decorative motifs, and the impact his pattern making had on the young Karl. In terms of content, however, specifi-

1. Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900* (Thames & Hudson, 2004).

cally their positive and life-affirming qualities, Karl Neuroth's paintings suggest less of a German worldview and more of a French—or more accurately, more of a Mediterranean—outlook on life. It was, of course, on the Cote d'Azur, at Saint-Tropez, Collioure and Nice, where Matisse realized so many of his great works. It is not surprising, therefore, that we learn Karl's great breakthrough came during a visit to nearby Spain in the mid-1990s, and resulted in his series of *tapas* paintings. Throughout his work, we find none of the anxiety, none of the *Sturm und Drang* of so much German painting, but rather the *joie de vivre* of the Mediterranean.

“Grounded” imagery is the term Erika Funke uses, and she describes the “sense of rightness” Karl's paintings evoke. Certainly Matisse was on the same track when he famously wrote of his own work, “What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity devoid of troubling subject matter, an art that might be for every mental worker . . . like an appeasing influ-

ence, like a mental soother, something like a good armchair in which to rest from physical fatigue.”<sup>2</sup>

As with all exhibitions, this one could not have been realized without the contributions of many individuals. Thanks, first, to Karl Neuroth, for agreeing to the exhibition, but thanks most of all because without Karl's vision, effort and enthusiasm the fine arts program at Keystone College and the exhibition series simply would not be. Thanks also to Laura Craig of Laura Craig Galleries, Scranton, for helping curate the exhibit, and to Rolfe Ross for the back cover photograph of Karl in his studio. Finally, a special thanks to Erika Funke of WVIA FM Public Radio in northeast Pennsylvania for writing the wonderful essay on Karl's life and work.

Drake Gómez

Director of Exhibitions, Linder Gallery

2. Henri Matisse, *Notes of a Painter* (1908).

## FIGURES

1. *Arrangement I*. 2005, mixed media on canvas, 36" × 48".
2. *Arrangement II*. 2005, mixed media on canvas, 36" × 48".
3. *Arrangement III*. 2005, mixed media on canvas, 36" × 72".
4. *Arrangement IV*. 2005, mixed media on canvas, 36" × 36".





Figure 1



Figure 2



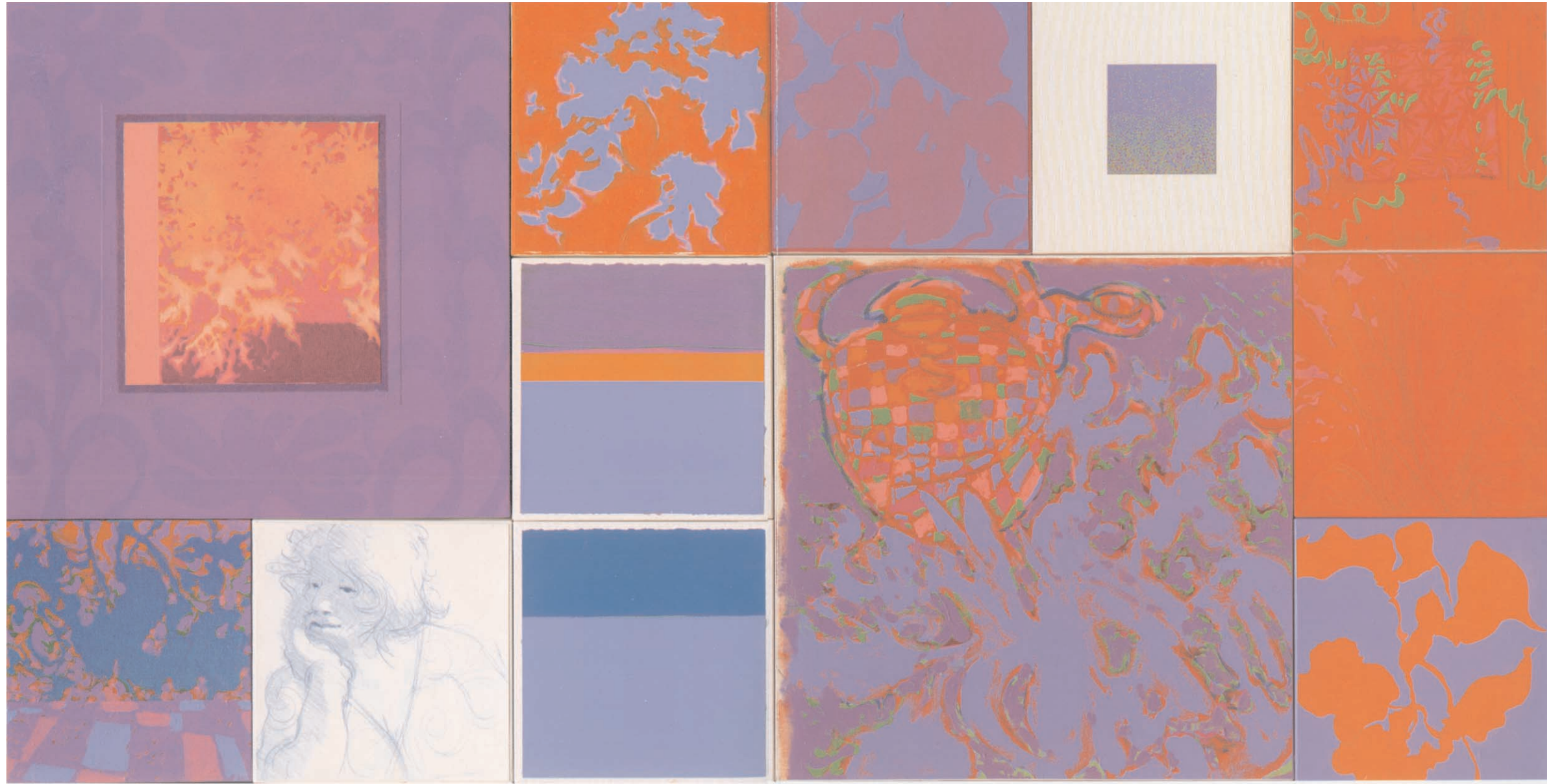


Figure 3



Figure 4

# KARL NEUROTH

Essay by Erika Funke

The world's fullness is not made, but found.

—Richard Wilbur

It was a temple to a civilization—a distillation of the best and most characteristic elements of German tradition and culture. And the building was the talk of the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago, with its cupola soaring 150 feet into the air. “The German House, located on the Midway Plaisance, was poetical; it had a hundred delicacies of color and ornament that all in Jackson Park were quick to admire.”<sup>1</sup> One eyewitness wrote, “The white walls, both outside and inside, to a great extent are covered with that peculiarly German medieval decorative painting, largely composed of scroll work, apparently burlesque heraldry, black lettering, which no other nation can do anything like so well.”<sup>2</sup>

Johann Otto Neuroth was trained in the Teutonic tradition of decorative arts and came to America as a highly skilled crafts-

man and talented artist to tend to surfaces, edges and frames of that magnificent edifice, celebrating, as it did, a proud way of understanding and ordering the world. And Neuroth soon discovered the way of life in America to his liking. With his tasks at the fair complete, he found skills like his in demand in a stronghold of German immigration in southern Pennsylvania and went on to settle in Reading, where he worked in the many churches and in the mansions of the well-to-do families who owned the area's active textile mills. Painstaking applications of gold leaf and intricate stencil design—he did these very well, while maintaining his own artist's studio, a space of clutter and charm where pattern ran riot. Grandson Karl remembers the bold carpets against the broad print of the overstuffed sofa, the intricacy of the ornamental wallpaper's design, the hanging crystal lamps, and the Buddhas looking on with their lighted umbrellas, and he laughs lovingly about his grandfather's passion for this tumble of textures and colors. “Horror vacui, I guess,” says Karl. (“Horror vacui”, literally, “fear of empty space” or “fear of emptiness.”)

Karl was only five and homebound from school when he picked up a pencil and began to draw for the very first time.

1. C. Graham, “Scenes from the 1893 World's Fair,” WashingtonMo.com.

2. Paul V. Galvin Library Digital History Collection, Illinois Institute of Technology.



Grandpa offered tips and words of encouragement and found himself allowing his curious grandson to slip into his studio to watch him paint. One day Karl came upon Grandpa concentrating on the still life before him. Karl saw the table and saw the vase—empty—and yet on the canvas the vessel was filled with tulips or some other lovely blooms. “But Grossvater, where are the flowers?” asked Karl. Grandfather smiled and put his finger to his head, “They are up here.” Johann knew flowers—the anatomy of the bud, the blossom, the stem, the leaf—and the stylized petals and vines for stenciling. He didn’t need to see a flower to paint a flower. And all these years later Karl Neuroth finds himself painting flowers and plants (and much more) and celebrating pattern and color, yet the way he knows flowers is nothing like his Grandpa’s way.

There was a long time when Karl’s work was successful artistically and in demand by those who loved his paintings, but he became unhappy. He arrived at the point at which he knew in his mind’s eye what the works would look like even before they were finished. There was no excitement, no spark, as he approached the canvas.

It might have happened anywhere, but it took place in passionate and earthy Spain, this creative revelation. Karl was caught up by, intrigued with the tapas, all set out in little servings, on a visit in 1994. The knife was straight and slim; the fork flared and the plate was luscious in its closed curving. He fell in love with the shapes and the interplay among them and began sketching them every which way.

Karl is always looking and drawing what catches his eye on tiny bits of paper or napkins or whatever’s at hand. In fact, when he first arrived at Keystone College in 1965, he took to pinning these drawings up on the wall—hundreds of them—and he would have fun shuffling them around now and again.

Suddenly Karl found himself back in his Clarks Summit studio filling huge pieces of tracing-type paper with forks and knives, plates and spoons, relishing their forms and the contrasts between them, applying pastel colors, working with renewed passion and alarming his friends with images they couldn’t recognize as coming from the Karl they knew.

But he was coming into his own. Beginner’s steps at first, with the tapas pieces, and certainly the elements were all there. It wasn’t easy. His dear wife Scottie would call out, “Karl, don’t think—paint! Trust your own sense of harmony!” And he and the community at Keystone lost her much too soon. But Karl loosened his grip, and he has even abandoned the pencil he first picked up at the age of five. He now works with blackboard chalk as he draws the lines ever more freely, a curve and a half loop here, a sweeping arc there, without interference from his strategic mind.

And now, ten years later, he believes he has at last come to trust his instincts implicitly, his feeling for color and pattern. His current pieces glow with color, especially the large yellow-on-yellow and orange-on-orange paintings. Patterns fill the space, subtly, and emerge from the surface to meet our eye. Karl speaks of colors “popping” and forms “exploding,” as he creates organic shapes in constant tension with elements of hard-edged geometry. A vertical line from top to bottom interrupts the flow of leaf forms floating above the picture plane, and the color-filled canvases carry an electric charge.

Rarely, if ever, does Karl dilute the paint on the palette. He works, he says, with seventy separate hues in their pure state to preserve the impact of the colors’ own brilliance. All this is played out within squares—at first 1 foot by 1 foot and then 2 feet by 2 feet. And now he is experimenting with canvases 3 feet by 3 feet, as he finds the smaller squares can’t contain all the energy of the images he is creating.

It seems most fitting that he discovered these square-format stretchers—wide and deep, making frames unnecessary—in New York. And it is his loving partnership with Diane, his oh-so-talented wife, that has taken Karl to the city, where she owns and directs an internationally recognized design firm. As these two make their lives now in New York and Clarks Summit, there is a new energy and universe of forms and spaces in Karl's life and work, opening him again to the jazz-like rhythms of urban life that he knew during his time at Tyler in Philadelphia.

Whether he is sketching a tree en-plein-air or capturing a jazz saxophonist in solo flight, it is the same. Karl sees the forms in relationship to their environment, their place in overall space, but even more so, the “undrawn voids”—the spaces between the branches and under the musician's arms. It is a way of seeing that comes naturally to the grandson of an artist who spent his life creating flat, pattern-like decorative paintings and wallpaper with patterns defined by the dominant background. To that end, Karl's backgrounds are never mild. He chooses aggressive colors like persimmon and canary yellow so that the “back” will come forth.

He actually works from back to front, creating the negative space first, so that the forms emerge from the “void.” Just look at his plant-like forms with petals and stems that flow away from the center and, in some cases, simply melt away before our eyes, as if dissolving into what must be called the background.

These are not his grandfather's flowers, placed just so and manipulated for effect. Karl's are lyrical, floating forms he discovers or uncovers. Instead of the horror vacui of an earlier tradition, we find in Karl's art what can only be called the “vacuum plenum.”

Modern physicists suggest “that what we perceive through the senses as empty space is actually the plenum (fullness), which is

the ground for the existence of everything, including ourselves. The things that appear to our senses are derivative forms and the true meaning can be seen only when we consider the plenum, in which they are generated and sustained, and into which they must ultimately vanish.”<sup>3</sup>

Poet Robert Cording believes the age-old artistic impulse concerns the all-consuming desire “to feel the infinite fullness of reality in every moment and in every encounter.”<sup>4</sup> And Karl has drawers filled with such potential moments waiting to be realized through his art. By now the hundreds of little sketches from life that he used to pin to his wall have grown to thousands, all filed by subject in his studio cabinets—animals, trees, chairs, eating utensils—any one of these “notes to himself” can be transformed by Karl into an experience on canvas that takes us to a creative “edge”—the edge of the square stretcher, yes—but implicitly to the vibrant place of tension at the border of “order and wildness dancing cheek-to-cheek in a vital and necessary dance” that is life.<sup>5</sup>

A geranium or a hand-carved chair as seen by Karl Neuroth can be a place of epiphany. The attention of the artist's eye is such, for poet Czeslaw Milosz, that the “veil of everyday habit falls away and what we paid no attention to, because it struck us as so ordinary, is revealed as miraculous.”<sup>6</sup> And what Karl loves about his current way of working is taking each individual canvas or “moment” and massing them together on a wall and creating even larger patterns and more complex “music,” changing the squares around and finding fresh visions and new delights.

3. David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (Routledge, 1996).

4. Robert Cording, *Image*, Spring/Summer 2004, Number 42.

5. David Whyte, *The Heart Aroused* (Currency/Doubleday, 1994).

6. Czeslaw Milosz, quoted in *Image* Number 42.

Karl is committed to creating “grounded” images that we can look at with surprise and a sigh at the sense of rightness. “Human beings have an intuitive capacity and knowledge that somewhere at the center of life is something ineffably and unalterably right and good, and this ‘rightness’ can be discovered through artistic explorations” and shared through painting, poetry, music, and theatre.<sup>7</sup> Those artists whose work is political in nature are creating very important expressions, according to Karl, but in the end, his personality, history and past influences have led him to develop paintings that are rooted in a deep and

7. David Whyte, quoted in *Image* Number 42.

abiding sense of the positive, while always acknowledging the perennial tension that is inherent in our lives as they are lived out in this world of complexity and change.

Karl beams as he declares he has finally found his voice. Even more exciting, these paintings, these images, these insights into the world are only the beginning, “Who knows how they will morph and develop?” he says. And he’s arrived at this watershed having been grounded in a place he calls his emotional home, working among his esteemed colleagues, friends and the talented students at Keystone College, encouraged in an always changing, deeply felt creative engagement with the world and this incomparable family.





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