

Masterpieces and Curiosities

The Jewish Museum's collection is vast and diverse. Some of the works are recognized artworks of great significance, beauty, and craftsmanship. Others are oddities—unexpected and eccentric creations that merit closer attention. This Scene focuses on a single object or group of objects, allowing us to reexamine and rethink them in light of other artworks and source materials. Even the most apparently peculiar work of art reveals complex histories and rich layers of meaning when seen in the larger context of cultural and social history.

Elaine Lustig Cohen

Over six decades, Elaine Lustig Cohen (born in 1927, died in 2016) moved among diverse activities including art, design, and rare-book dealing. She began her career as a graphic designer in the mid-1950s, extending the vocabulary of European Modernism—Constructivism, Dada, and the Bauhaus—into an American context for publishers, architects, and cultural institutions. From 1962 to 1967, she helped shape the Jewish Museum's institutional identity, directing the design of catalogues, posters, booklets, and other printed material for its progressive exhibition program.

At the same time, Lustig Cohen developed a hard-edge style as a painter. With a formal language of solid colors, abstract geometric shapes, and minimally visible brushstrokes, her paintings directly relate to her design work and to the movement called Postpainterly Abstraction. Lustig Cohen's artistic contributions demonstrate that the lineage of Postpainterly Abstraction should be expanded beyond the fine arts to include postwar graphic design.

Prem Krishnamurthy

Cole Akers

Guest Co-Curators

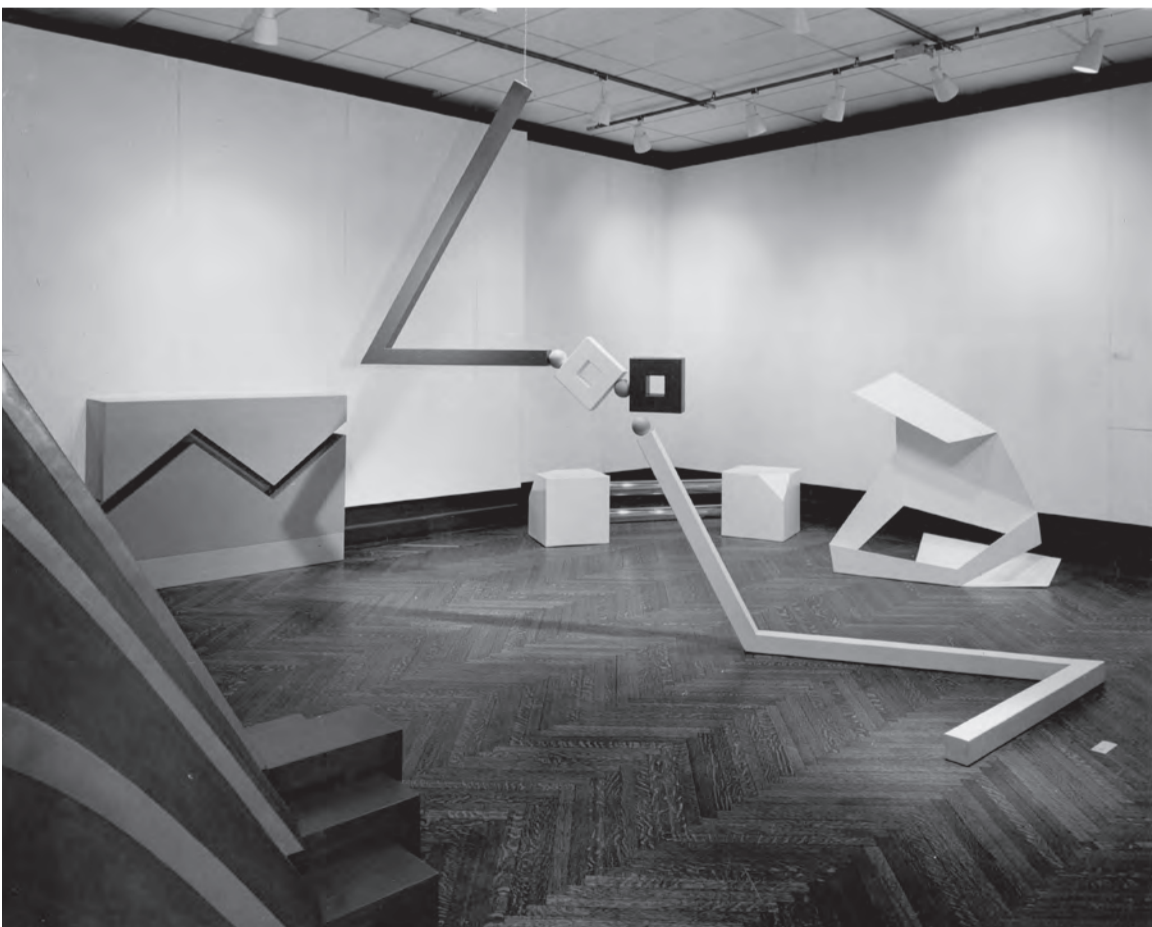
All of the artworks in this Scene are by Elaine Lustig Cohen.

Jewish Museum Catalogues and Ephemera

Beginning with the appointment of Alan Solomon as director in 1962, the Jewish Museum built a reputation as a center for contemporary art in New York City. In the early 1960s the institution presented survey exhibitions of young artists, such as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, who later became well known and highly successful. The museum recruited Elaine Lustig Cohen to develop a comprehensive graphic identity for its publications and printed ephemera that would reflect this experimental program.

Lustig Cohen designed approximately twenty catalogues for the Jewish Museum including *Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors*, the exhibition that introduced Minimalism to a broad public. The cover features an abstracted P and a snaking red S against a vibrant yellow background, echoing the colorful materials and bold forms of the Minimalist sculptures that appeared in the show.

Designs for monographic exhibitions often related more directly to the work of the artist. For Ad Reinhardt, Lustig Cohen placed the artist's name beneath a large black square—a visual reference to the iconic black paintings on view in the exhibition. Kenneth Noland's surname repeats across the cover of his exhibition catalogue, emulating the repeating parallel or nested shapes of his paintings as well as their vivid palette. Lustig Cohen thus alluded to the content of each exhibition while also maintaining her distinctive design vocabulary.



Installation view of *Primary Structures* at the Jewish Museum, curated by Kynaston McShine, 1966

Book Covers

In 1955 Elaine Lustig Cohen began her career as a graphic designer with three key projects: the signage and lettering for New York City's celebrated Seagram Building, which was designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe with Philip Johnson; brochures for the Girl Scouts of America; and book jackets for Meridian Publishers. Drawing on her knowledge of modern typography and avant-garde design principles, such as asymmetrical composition, dramatic scale, and image montage, Lustig Cohen forged a distinctive graphic voice. For book jackets, she described her process as one of distillation in which she would identify the central ideas of the text and render them abstractly with bold lettering, expressive forms, and playfully collaged photographic elements.

Paintings

For the past decade the problems of painting which interest me have been latent within my graphic and interior design, however it has been during the past two years that I have been able to separate painting from design without either reducing the problems to their design elements or losing the contact between the idea behind my paintings and techniques I mastered as a designer. The formal statements of the paintings became primary without the informational considerations of specific design solutions.

Elaine Lustig Cohen, 1968

Elaine Lustig Cohen began to focus on painting during her years working with the Jewish Museum. Her hard-edge paintings, made up of rectilinear patterns that emanate from a center and occasionally wrap around the sides of the canvas, recall abstract Modernist works such as Kazimir Malevich's paintings of bold squares and crosses and Anni Albers's weavings, with their rectilinear designs and deft combinations of colors. They also draw on the compositional strategies of her design work. Her distinctive palette of secondary colors, such as orange, pink, and lavender, also stands apart from that of classic Modernism, which emphasizes primary colors—red, yellow, and blue—and black and white. She distinguished her process as a designer—generating ideas in response to the specific requirements of a client or subject—from her exploration of more open-ended formal problems in the fine arts. Lustig Cohen's work points to new art-historical narratives that acknowledge the productive intersections of art and design.



Anni Albers, *Wall Hanging*, 1926. Produced by Gunta Stölzl Workshop. Mercerized cotton and silk, 80¼ × 47¾ in. (203.8 × 120.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, Everfast Fabrics Inc. and Edward C. Moore Jr. Gift, 1969. Artwork © The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; image provided by The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, New York