

# Caroline Lee From Chicago To Paris

DOMINIQUE DALEMONT



Although recently challenged by London and New York, Paris has a longstanding tradition of attracting foreign artists, as early as 1905 for Ossip Zadkine or 1910 for Marc Chagall, among the most famous.

Caroline Lee is no exception. It was her longstanding interest in the French Revolution followed by the birth of the Republic in the nineteenth century, a violent history whose origins she describes as a kind of “cleansing through fire,” that initially sparked her love for France.

In 1958, she was awarded a Fulbright grant to pursue her artistic career in Paris as a sculptor. Indeed, although she was studying painting at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, it was the challenge of sculpture that continuously and secretly attracted her. As early as 1952, she had admired the works of Rodin exhibited in San Francisco at the Legion of Honor fine arts museum. Later, she avidly followed the Art Institute tours conducted by Roberto Matta, a Chilean Surrealist artist living in Paris. And she was influenced by Alan Frumkin, a gallery owner committed to being helpful to the students of the Art Institute. In his gallery, she discovered the works of Alberto Giacometti and Germaine Richier.

As a young artist, Caroline Lee also spent time in the studio of Richard Hunt, a native Chicagoan and a particularly gifted sculptor whose work she greatly admired and whose tools fascinated her. An outstanding student, Caroline Lee was able to spend several weeks not attending painting classes but instead hidden away in the Art Institute’s maintenance work shop, where she could transpose into steel models she initially conceived in balsa wood.



*Flower of Evil (La Fleur du Mal)*, 1963

Checklist no. 2



One encounter was to be especially determining in the course of her artistic and personal life. It was her contact with painter Edgar Pillet, then a visiting professor at the School of the Art Institute, that introduced Caroline Lee to the French mentality and culture. Later, Pillet also introduced her to the famous sculptor César in Paris.

Caroline Lee's Parisian artistic adventure is inseparable from the many people she met upon her arrival: artists and small factory owners disposed to working with her. Thanks to her dynamic socializing and poignantly intense interest, she was welcomed into several factories and studios where she was able to learn different techniques and eventually acquire second hand equipment and materials. She began to weld, established her first foundry, and discovered polystyrene (styrofoam).

In 1962, she met Yugoslavian artist Knez (1923–1992). He became her husband and, through their collaboration and profound artistic intimacy, his own work evolved from painting to sculpture. In 1989, after she returned from a two-year stay in Chicago, Knez made space for her in his studio a few miles outside of Paris, the same studio she occupies today in Le Perreux sur Marne.

Caroline Lee has occupied studios on the outskirts south, west, and east of Paris. While historically, the heart of Paris's artistic life had always been the Montparnasse neighborhood, lack of space, rising living expenses, and real estate speculation gradually pushed artists outside of Paris, especially sculptors who generally need more space than painters do.

Among all the salons that compose the vitality of Parisian artistic life, the *Salon de la Jeune Sculpture* (1948–1978) occupied several different prestigious locations like the Rodin Museum, the Orangerie in the Tuileries Gardens, and the National Museum of Modern Art inside the Palais de Tokyo. During its thirty-year existence, this salon, organized by the highly regarded and well-liked critic Denys Chevalier, exposed the works of over a thousand sculptors of all nationalities, including Lee, on many occasions.

Caroline Lee's work is strong and singular. More than other artists, she has made herself known for her breathtaking stylistic diversity, from the purest geometrical abstraction (*Angel in Hell*, page 33) to the acrobatic combinations of organic, anthropomorphic, zoomorphic or even natural elements (*Homage to Martin Luther King: Eyes on the Prize*, page 44, among many others).

The combined virtues of rigidity and plasticity afforded by steel enable Lee to assemble, at the proper distance, a number of figurative elements by combining them with geometrical tubular shapes. With one leg, one arm, a foot, a hand, one or several heads, she composes seemingly weightless bouquets of very personal and inspired themes, like *Homage to James Joyce*, the baroque coils of *Flower of Evil* (page 24), and *Don Quixote's Bird* (page 45).

In so doing, Caroline Lee's work inscribes itself in line with the surrealist tradition. In 1919, Max Ernst described his collages as "the fortuitous encounter of two distant realities onto a non-suited plane"—as in "not conforming to common usage." This profession of faith could well describe Lee's work.



I don't think one can speak of "progression," per se, regarding Caroline Lee's career. Her work demonstrates a constant effervescence, an enduring quest for new techniques, and new themes for reflection. One can grasp in her work the constant back and forth between dreamlike allusive figuration and the sharpest, uncluttered abstraction.

And yet, there is still a very striking break in Lee's work, marked by great technological audacity for the time. In 1966, her friend the photographer Augustin Dumage introduced her to Michel Tissot-Dupont who had a studio and small factory in Annecy. This led Caroline Lee to make her sculptures, or have them made, using machine tools (band saws, milling cutters, lathes, etc.). Her "machine tool" pieces were conceived in space, directly carved in blocks of polystyrene, cut with hacksaw blades or a hot wire, and polished using high-speed grinders. Next, extremely precise and scaled execution drawings were entrusted to the factory, with indications for each piece, specifying the tool to use and the desired finish. *The Androgene* was the first piece of a long and remarkable series.

It is important to underline that women sculptors using stainless steel were rare at this time. As early as 1962 (for the *Pergolese* project), Caroline Lee selected stainless steel as her medium for its inalterability in the face of poor weather conditions. In the past few decades, I have met and studied the works of 102 metal sculptors living in France: sixteen were women, four used stainless steel, among whom three had large scale works manufactured by others. Caroline Lee is still the only sculptor who tackles stainless steel on a monumental scale by herself.

In 1981, Caroline Lee won a competition for the *Monument to the Resistance* (page 41), commissioned by the town of Montreuil-sous-Bois, a working class community to the east of Paris. Although it might seem odd for an American sculptor to win a commission of such national historical importance as the French Resistance, there was in fact no legal obstacle to her winning. France is populated with talented artists of foreign origins, especially Paris. Differentiating between a French national and a foreign artist living in France was therefore inconceivable. Furthermore, Caroline Lee slipped into her application a photo of her father as a young man wearing the French army uniform while a volunteer ambulance driver during World War I, before the United States joined in 1917.

Her more recent rounded forms, like *The Great White Lady* (page 47) and *The Shoulder* (page 48) borrow their organic shapes, often checkered like shells, armors, or breastplates, from turtles, snails, and seashells. These sculptures are in line with a famous piece by Italian futurist Umberto Boccioni: *Dinamismo di un Cavallo in Corsa* (1914–1915). This is the early period of modernism using "direct" metal, as opposed to melted metal, as did Julio Gonzales, Pablo Gargallo, Pablo Picasso or Alexander Calder, Antoine Pevsner, and Naum Gabo. During those same prolific times, Marcel Duchamp was inventing ready-mades.

Similar to Constantin Brancusi, whose work she always found inspiring, Caroline Lee asserts and demonstrates through her work that "each millimeter of the sculpture must be alive. Each part of the work speaks of the whole."

"Even before leaving Chicago more than 50 years ago," Caroline recalls, "I knew I would be happy in France." That she would not deny today!