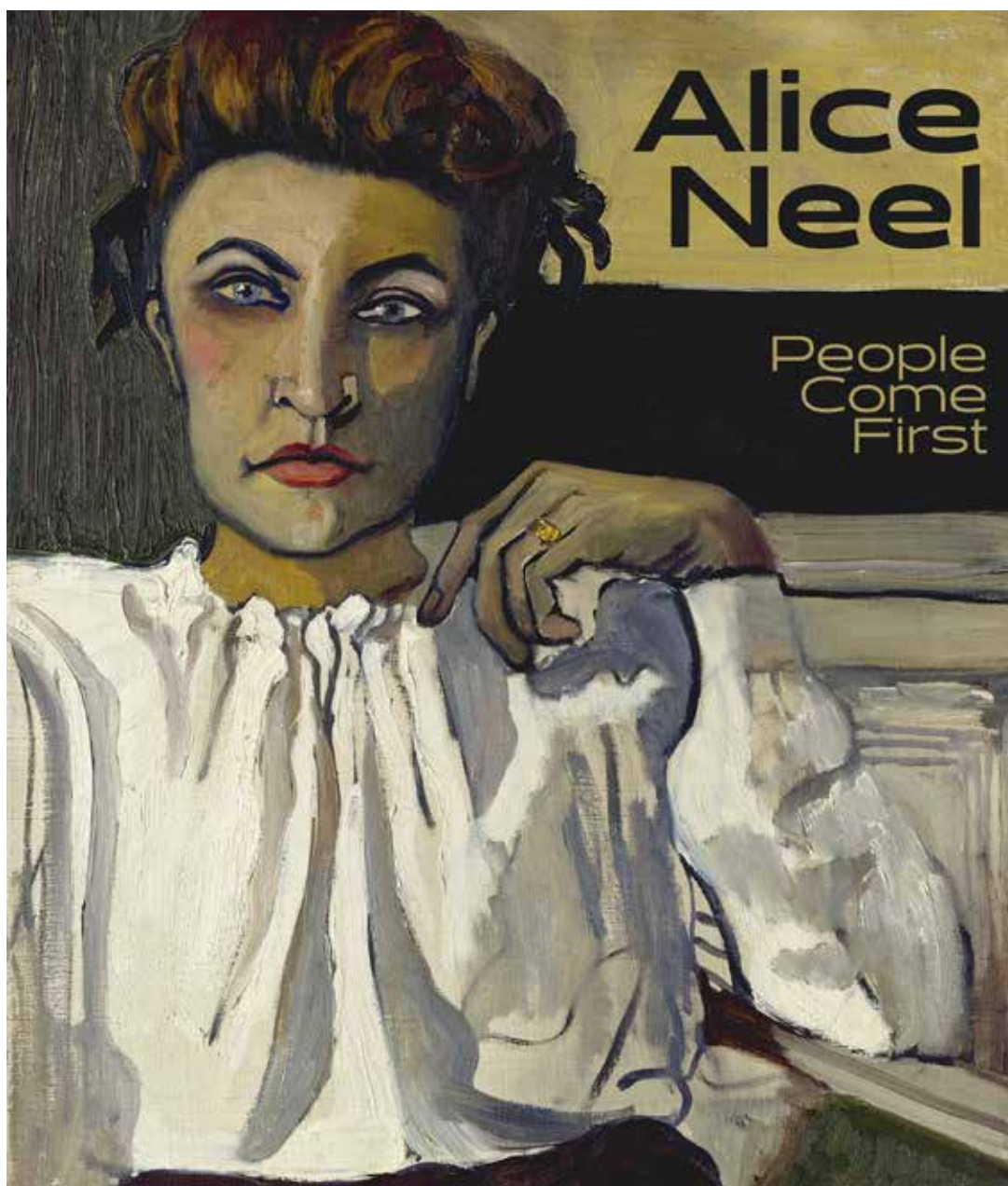


GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

Press release



Opening on September 17

Sponsored by



Some portraits manage to show the social, economic, and political context to which their sitter belongs, and even clearly capture the spirit of their time. Alice Neel set herself this goal as soon as she started painting, and there is no doubt that she achieved it while also filling each of her works with emotional intensity.

This exhibition, the first retrospective in Spain to be dedicated to this American artist, brings together a select group of works, most of them vivid and minutely executed portraits in which the artist distills the personality and presence of those who posed for her.

The starting point of Neel's work is a desire to represent urban life in a new way, and especially that of New York, a city where she lived for several decades and which in her pictures becomes the symbolic metropolis or capital of the 20th century.

It is a great satisfaction for Iberdrola to support this new exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, where art becomes a different way of writing history: the forgotten history of those underprivileged for reasons of gender, race, or social class, and the struggle of women to be professionals and mothers at the same time.

Throughout her long career, Alice Neel overcame numerous limitations and social and artistic conventions to carve out her own path and achieve her artistic purposes. She was determined to show the world her courage, and it finally won her recognition, especially in the last decades of her career.

Her painting is a celebration of existence, and at the same time a verification of its tragedies. Neel portrays her sitters as they face life and their circumstances, sometimes extremely tough, and she also offers the testimony of her own experiences, including loss and mourning.

In these works, the visitor will confront not only the gaze of the person who is posing but also, potentially, that of the artist herself, discovering her ambition, the depth of her explorations, and her unshakeable humanism.

I therefore urge visitors to surrender to the passion of the characters portrayed in the exhibition, and to recognize in them the testimony of a courageous woman who was ahead of her time in the first half of the 20th century in the USA, a country with which Iberdrola has the deepest ties.

Finally, I should like to acknowledge the magnificent work of the Museum in making this new exhibition possible, and in continuing with an excellent program of cultural activities that our Company takes pride in collaborating with.

Ignacio S. Galán
Chairman of Iberdrola

Alice Neel: People Come First

- Dates: September 17, 2021–February 6, 2022
 - Curated by Kelly Baum, Cynthia Hazen Polsky and Leon Polsky Curator of Contemporary Art, and Randall Griffey, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, with Lucía Agirre, Curator, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao.
 - Exhibition organized by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in conjunction with the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao and The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco
 - Sponsored by Iberdrola
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- Neel used her works to document scenes of loss and suffering, as well as strength and resistance, with relentless frankness and acute empathy.
 - From 1938 to 1962, Alice Neel and her family lived in Spanish Harlem (NY, USA) where the artist used her paintbrushes to capture the soul of her ethnically diverse, and often disadvantaged neighbors, who had seldom been the subjects of art until this point in time.
 - Her attention to the vulnerability of her sitters imbues her work with an unmistakable feeling, as they seek to shed light on the emotional and physical struggles of women, especially deprived women such as herself.
 - When figuration fell out of vogue in New York during the 1940s and 50s and Abstract Expressionism came to dominate, (which she described as 'anti-humanist') Neel refused to follow trends and change her style even though formal and technical experimentation were always part of her practice.
 - Nudity and sex as part of the human experience are core themes in Alice Neel's body of work, she confidently subverted the way this genre had traditionally been treated throughout art history, where women were mere erotic objects.
 - "For me, people come first. I have tried to assert the dignity and eternal importance of the human being."—Alice Neel, 1950

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents the exhibition *Alice Neel: People Come First*, the first retrospective in Spain devoted to American artist Alice Neel (b. 1900, Pennsylvania; d. 1984, New York), thanks to the sponsorship of Iberdrola. The exhibition encompasses Neel's entire career as an artist

through some 100 paintings, drawings, and watercolors, including her most powerful portraits, which are celebrated today for their psychological insight.

The visit begins with some of her **early works**, such as *French Girl* (1920's), believed to have been made when she was at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women, and the portrait of *Carlos Enríquez* (1926), a work with loose brushstrokes that was first exhibited in Havana, Cuba, in 1927.

After her stay in vibrant 1920s Cuba, where her works were shown in public for the first time, in 1927 Alice Neel arrived in New York, the city that was to become her permanent home. There she began to paint portraits of the diversity and struggle of its people, as well as the city's parks and buildings, and bore constant witness to the life around her. In the 1930s and 1940s, Alice Neel worked for the Works Progress Administration (WPA), part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. Neel viewed art as history, and she used her work to record **New York's political life** and its events. One example is *Nazis Murder Jews* (1936), where she painted the 1936 May 1st parade which attracted throngs of demonstrators—in this painting, they are led by some of Neel's fellow artists—in order to draw attention to the emerging, brutal antisemitism of the Nazi regime.

From 1938 to 1962, Alice Neel and her family lived in Spanish Harlem and the artist used her paintbrushes to capture the soul of her neighbors, disadvantaged ethnically diverse population who had seldom been the subjects of art until then, as evident in her work *Georgie Arce No. 2* (1955).

Neel had known Arce since he was a child, and she painted him many times over the course of several years. Teenage Arce appears confident and is not threatening even though he is holding a knife pointed towards Neel and, by extension, towards the spectator.

Neel often invoked Honoré de Balzac's *The Human Comedy*, a benchmark work for the key figures in Marxism which examines the causes and effects of human action in 19th-century French society. From her personal worldview and a vantage point firmly rooted in 20th-century New York, Alice Neel used her work to document scenes of loss and suffering, as well as strength and resistance, with an implacable frankness and acute empathy. Her attention to the physical and psychological vulnerabilities of her sitters imbues the paintings in this section with an unmistakable feeling, reinforced by an often restricted palette. Her *Well Baby Clinic* (1928–29), one of the artist's most expressionistic works, depicts the hospital where Neel gave birth to her daughter Isabetta in 1928, a hospital for underprivileged women that the artist described as a "very dismal place." In this painting, she portrays herself with her daughter at a moment of peace and calmness in the midst of the human misery around them, shedding light on women's emotional and physical struggle, especially those impoverished like her.

The exhibition also includes a section dedicated to the artists' **cityscapes** in which Neel attests to the everyday beauty of New York's buildings and parks. In *Central Park* (1959) for example, nature and the buildings around it converge in a manmade landscape in which two small figures, seemingly lost before the vastness of the city, appear at the base of a staircase.

Another genre which did not escape Neel's perceptive paintbrush is **still life**, which provided her with attractive opportunities to either experiment with abstraction or reveal her characteristic humor. One example of the latter is *Thanksgiving* (1965), where Neel painted a decapitated capon in the sink, with Ajaxcans, sponges, and breakfast plates stating that it was her response to Pop Art, while in *Still Life, Rose of Sharon* (1973) her painting skills come to the fore through effects, textures, and materials.

The artist's opinion on **abstraction** evolved during her career. When figuration went out of fashion in the 1940s and 50s and Abstract Expressionism became the dominant movement, particularly in New York, Neel refused to change or abandon her style. Within this context, she publicly criticized abstract art, describing it as "anti-humanist." But Neel's reflection towards the end of her career that any great painting has "good abstract qualities" indicates that formal and technical experimentation were always a part of her practice. *Addiction* (1931) is Alice Neel's most abstract work. Its swirling, looping forms suggest an altered state of mind, as does its title, which hints, much like the distorted human figure therein, at psychic and physical turmoil. *Addiction* was painted in the year Neel spent almost entirely in psychiatric hospitals near Philadelphia. Whether she intended it as a picture of her own state of mind is unknown, however. Either way, this delicate watercolor establishes the importance she placed on form, color, and space as elements that communicate meaning in and of themselves, independent of biographical or representational content.

As part of the human experience, **nudity and sexuality** are two core themes in Alice Neel's work. The fact the nude is one of the most common genres throughout art history and that women's role has been limited to mere erotic objects was a particular challenge to Alice Neel, who adopted the theme and subverted it with ease.

On the one hand, her ingenious male nudes playfully contrast with the conventions of eroticism often seen in representations of women. On the other hand, the keen attention that Neel paid to nude pregnant women is unprecedented, especially in an era when the visual culture often softened or cleansed the topic.

Her paintings sensitively outline heavy bottoms, flaccid penises, drooping breasts, and taut skin, capturing the peculiarities and power of the nude human form—man, woman, child, older person, pregnant woman or partners—in a convincing fashion. In Neel's painting, the nude body always appears without apologies in all its honesty. Her 1930 nude of painter Ethel Ashton depicts an unforgiving figure and reveals the importance of portraying the psychological truth, while her 1933 image of Joe Gould shows this eccentric figure from the bohemian scene in Greenwich Village flanked by two other partial views of his nude body. Returning the viewer's gaze directly as he smiles, Gould inexplicably poses behind three rows of penises. Neel's coarse technique is suitable for her theme, and the graphic nature of the painting led it to be censored and hidden from public view until 1973.

Closing this section on the nude is the artist's self-portrait from 1980, where she shows her elderly body as a critique of society that is unused to seeing bodies like hers represented in either the fine arts or popular culture.

One of Alice Neel's prime accomplishments as an artist is the freedom and frankness with which she addressed sex and her own sexuality as a woman through delicate watercolors like *Alienation* (1935). In this

work, which is stripped of all romantic sentiment, Neel presents herself with her lover naked on the bed with her eyes and mouth closed, while her lover is standing before her in reddish socks, creating a triangular composition with the rails at the end of the bed and Alice Neel's hair, which is the same color.

Throughout her career, Neel's paintings foregrounded **motherhood**, with images of mothers in different stages, both before and after birth, and these works are among her most radical in her production. Unlike the fantasy-driven clichés that appear in popular culture and the fine arts, Neel's mothers are frank and specific. Her paintings and drawings empathetically reflect the challenge of having and raising children. Neel is familiar with the physical and psychological pressures that come with motherhood, especially for mothers like her with professional ambitions. It is a theme she addressed from the beginning of her career, as seen in *Mother and Child, Havana* (1926), to the end, as in *Carmen and Judy* (1972), where the tiny Judy is barely alive, against her mother Carmen's breast without nursing, showing the emaciated state of the baby girl, who died a few days later.

Her treatment of nude pregnant women is unprecedented in the history of art. *Childbirth* (1939), which the artist painted shortly before leaving the hospital after the birth of her son Richard, is one of the first paintings where she depicts a woman giving birth. It is a portrait of her roommate in the maternity ward in the middle of giving birth living her own agonizing experience.

The artist was consistent in her commitment to making "people's images," especially those around her who were part of the Culture/Counterculture scene. In her own words, "[they] reflect the era in a way that nothing else could. When portraits are good art they reflect the culture, the time and many other things... Art is a form of history... Now, a painting is [a portrait of a person], plus the fact that it is also the Zeitgeist, the spirit of the age." (Hills, *Alice Neel*, pp. 134, 167)

The exhibition presents dozens of Neel's most impactful portraits, which are celebrated today for their psychological insight. Whilst her models included many anonymous people, she also painted family members as well as artists, activists, civil rights leaders and celebrities who came within her orbit at different points in her life. Neel felt attracted by people who overcame social, political, and cultural boundaries, and she focused on the unique features of her models, taking care of each element of the composition to highlight both their personalities and their eccentricities.

In *Death of Mother Bloor* (1951), Neel probably drew from a photograph to portray Ella Reeve "Mother" Bloor (b. 1862; d. 1951) on her death bed. She was one of the first members of the Communist Party devoted to the rights of women and the working class. Additionally, in *Rita and Hubert* (1954), a brilliant study of color, contrast and drawing, she renders leftist writer Hubert Satterfield along with his girlfriend Rita.

One work that draws attention because of its apparently unfinished quality is *Black Draftee (James Hunter)* (1965). In 1965, the year President Lyndon B. Johnson decided to significantly boost the land forces in South Vietnam, Neel met James Hunter by coincidence and asked him to sit for a painting. The young man had just been drafted and was scheduled to deploy one week later. Following her usual practice, Neel began by outlining his body directly on the canvas and later filling in the parts of the head

and hands. When Hunter did not come back for his second session, Neel declared the work finished even though it was not; she signed it on the back and exhibited it nine years later.

CATALOGUE

Published on the occasion of the exhibition, the catalogue *Alice Neel: People Come First* surveys the seven decades of creation by the American artist, highlighting both her existential approach and the unique artistic qualities of her painting. With essays by Kelly Baum, Randall Griffey, Susanna V. Temkin, Meredith A. Brown, and Julia Bryan-Wilson, the book sheds light on Neel's life and career, as well as on her ideas, her humanism, and her claims on behalf of people's dignity.

DIDAKTIKA

In Focus: Against the Tide

As part of the Didaktika project, sponsored by BBK, the Museum designs didactic spaces, online contents, and special activities around each exhibition.

Under the title *In Focus: Against the Tide*, the educational space of the exhibition provides complementary information on key aspects of Neel's work like passion, resilience, inclusion, activism, gender issues, and public demonstrations, always outside the artistic trends of the day.

Visitors will find written materials on these topics, as well as the film *Alice Neel*, produced by the Estate of the artist.



Exhibition-related Programs

Introductory Talk (September 15)

Kelly Baum and Randall Griffey, curators of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Lucía Agirre, curator of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, will address the most interesting aspects of this show.

Shared Reflections*

On these in-person tours, professionals from the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao offer different viewpoints on the new exhibition.

- Curatorial View (September 29): Lucía Agirre, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao curator, will lead a tour around the main works in the show.
- Key Concepts (October 6): Marta Arzak, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao Associate Director of Digital Education, will talk with participants in the galleries on the didactic keys of the works.

*Sponsored by Fundación Vizcaína Aguirre

Screening of *Alice Neel* (October 15)

Directed by Andrew Neel and produced by the Estate of the artist, this film reveals the works of Alice Neel and the references to New York City throughout her over 40-year career.

Creative Session: *Beyond a Portrait* (December 2)

This workshop led by artist Sonia Rueda will examine topics like the human figure, identity and appearance related to the uncommon portraits of Alice Neel.

Cover image:

Alice Neel

Elenka, 1936

Oil on canvas

61 × 50.8 cm

The Metropolitan Museum, New York, Gift of Richard Neel and Hartley S. Neel, 1987

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All the information on the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is available at www.guggenheim-bilbao.eus (Press Room).

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For more information, you can get in touch with the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao press area at tel. +34 944 359 008 or email media@guggenheim-bilbao.eus

Alice Neel in her New York studio, circa 1960

Photo: Estate of Alice Neel

© The Estate of Alice Neel, Bilbao, 2021



Alice Neel

Carlos Enríquez, 1926

Oil on canvas

76.8 × 61 cm Framed: 83.8 × 68.6 cm

Estate of Alice Neel

Courtesy The Estate of Alice Neel

© The Estate of Alice Neel, Bilbao, 2021



Alice Neel*Nazis Murder Jews, 1936*

Oil on canvas

106.7 × 76.2 cm

Rennie Collection, Vancouver

© The Estate of Alice Neel, Bilbao, 2021

**Alice Neel***Georgie Arce No. 2, 1955*

Oil on canvas

76.2 × 55.9 cm Framed: 83.5 × 62.9 cm

Collection of Lonti Ebers

© The Estate of Alice Neel, Bilbao, 2021

**Alice Neel***Central Park, 1959*

Oil on canvas

111.8 × 86.4 cm Framed: 121 × 95.6 × 5.1 cm

Estate of Alice Neel

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**Alice Neel***Thanksgiving, 1965*

Oil on canvas

76.2 × 86.4 cm Framed: 98.4 × 68.6 cm

The Brand Family Collection

© The Estate of Alice Neel, Bilbao, 2021

**Alice Neel***Self-Portrait, 1980*

Oil on canvas

135.3 × 101 × 2.5 cm Framed 144.8 × 109.2 × 5.1 cm

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

© The Estate of Alice Neel, Bilbao, 2021



Alice Neel

Carmen and Judy, 1972

Oil on canvas

108.6 × 83.5 × 4.4 cm

Oklahoma City Museum of Art, Westheimer Family Collection

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**Alice Neel**

Pregnant Maria, 1964

Oil on canvas

81.3 × 119.4 cm Framed: 102.9 × 140.7 × 1.9 cm

Private collection

© The Estate of Alice Neel, Bilbao, 2021

**Alice Neel**

Nancy and Olivia, 1967

Oil on canvas

99.1 × 91.4 cm Framed: 106 × 98.4 cm

Collection of Diane and David Goldsmith

© The Estate of Alice Neel, Bilbao, 2021

**Alice Neel**

Elenka, 1936

Oil on canvas

61 × 50.8 cm

The Metropolitan Museum, New York, Gift of Richard Neel and Hartley S. Neel, 1987

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**Alice Neel**

Geoffrey Hendricks and Brian, 1978

Oil on canvas

118.7 × 93.3 cm

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Purchase, by exchange, through an anonymous gift

© The Estate of Alice Neel, Bilbao, 2021



Alice Neel

Black Draftee (James Hunter), 1965

Oil on canvas

152.4 × 101.6 cm Framed: 176.2 × 125.7 × 9 cm

COMMA Foundation, Belgium

Courtesy The Estate of Alice Neel

© The Estate of Alice Neel, Bilbao, 2021

