Louise Nevelson

WOMEN OF WISDOM
SCULPTOR
PIONEERING ARTIST
ARTS & CULTURE

BY LYNN GILBERT

WOMEN OF WISDOM SERIES:
PORTRAITS AND STORIES
OF TRAILBLAZERS WHO
TRANSFORMED OUR WORLD

Women of Wisdom:
Louise Nevelson

By
LYNN GILBERT

Excerpted from *Particular Passions: Talks With Women Who Have Shaped Our Times*

Women of Wisdom

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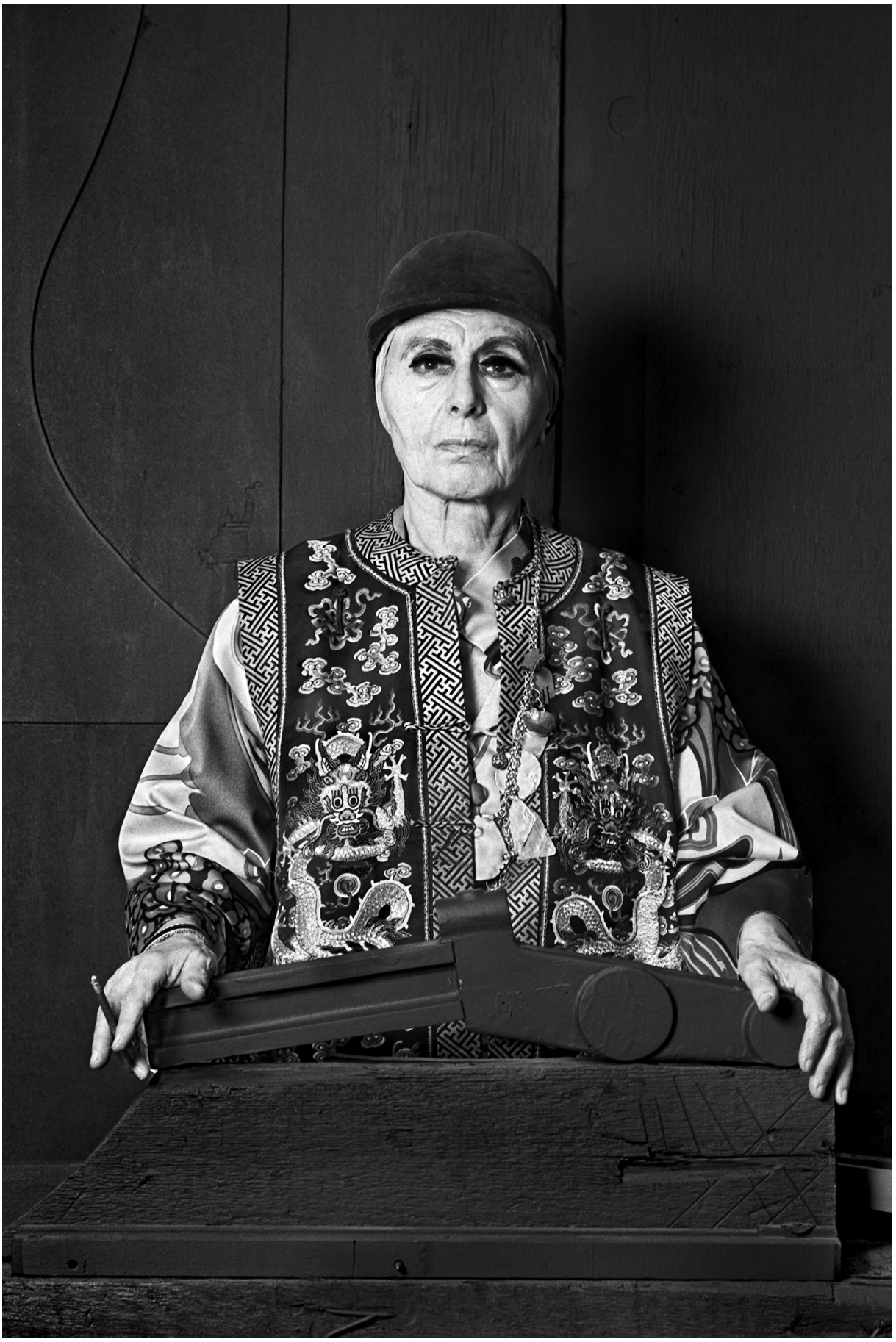

Louise Nevelson in her home. Photograph by Lynn Gilbert, as commissioned by the Pace Gallery, New York City.
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Louise Nevelson

B. 1899, Kyiv Oblast, Ukraine – D. 1988, New York City

Louise Nevelson was an American sculptor whose innovative work broke old taboos, proving that large-scale works and a vast body of work were not exclusive to men.

At the turn of the 20th century, her family emigrated from Ukraine, then ruled by Czarist Russia, to a seaport town in Maine, where they always felt like outsiders.

Her father's work in a lumberyard exposed her to wood. He bought and sold houses and built ships, which laid the foundation for her monumental works. Like her mother, who dressed as if she were still in Czarist Russia, Nevelson dressed flamboyantly to draw attention to her art.

As a youngster, Nevelson was a superstar, but felt like an outsider. She was determined to become an artist from an early age. When the son of a wealthy shipping magnate from New York came to visit her father, she knew he would propose and that she would accept.

However, she rejected the traditional roles of wife and mother, separating from her husband and raising her son alone. Despite financial constraints, she pursued her dream, scouring the streets for discarded materials and transforming them into art.

To support herself, Nevelson took on teaching and odd jobs, while relentlessly honing her craft and exploring different mediums. But recognition in the art world didn't come until she was in her sixties.

Nevelson defied societal expectations and reshaped the art world for women. For herself, the monumental environments that she created replaced the real world in which she had never felt at home. A key figure in the Abstract Expressionist movement, Nevelson ranks among the most significant sculptors of all time.

I THINK BASICALLY the whole thing in my life was that I wanted to see the world with more awareness and more harmony. I've been able to do that almost as much as is human.

I knew that I was gifted because from the day you go to school, your teachers know what you have. At least they did in my school. In Maine, over seventy years ago, they felt I was an artist. They just knew it. Something about me projected it, even as a child, and I knew it. Some people are born a certain way. They really are, no doubt about it. Caruso had a voice when he was born. Well, others had voices, but he had the combination. Then he built on it. You have something, then you devote your life to building on it. Now, I evidently came from a place, maybe it was the home and the environment, and all that. It made me feel like a high-powered engine. I had energy. So, it does mean that some of us are born with these constitutions from birth. We're born a certain way.

Then also, I think being an artist is a state of mind. There were a great many frustrations in my life, too. But the only thing I can say is that I was looking for harmony, and I think my long suit was that I was able to remember things and externalize them. I wanted harmony within myself so I externalized it in my work.

I never used a yardstick to measure anything. It would embarrass me. If I had to measure this to this and I had to stop to measure it with a yardstick, there would already be a question in my mind. My mind would have already gone through something that I don't want. I know where I want it to be. Consequently, I just knew what I wanted out of life.

It wasn't easy, but I didn't know you could live another way. I didn't know.

When I was about seventeen or eighteen—it was during World War I—I was the most exciting girl in my whole town. I was already studying voice and dramatics and modern dance. I was captain of the high school basketball team, so I wasn't what you call an academic student, but I was out in front in these things. Well, if you were as active as I, you couldn't be an old maid at the time.

The Nevelson brothers had a shipping firm down on Wall Street in New York, and they had ships for the government, for Woodrow Wilson. They were playing a big role in the war. They came to Maine because we had shipyards in Maine. And they came for repairs because their ships had been shot at. Anyway, we got acquainted. I was pretty young. I didn't go out much with boys. I was already pretty mature and I wasn't going to go around with those local kids.

I think I was caught. I never solved it, but I knew that when the older Mr. Nevelson said his younger brother was coming up, I smelt that they were already figuring things out—and so was I. I had told my mother I wasn't going to get married because I was going to go to Pratt Art Institute in New York and that I'd be an artist. I wanted to go there so I could teach art and be self-supporting. Then I got a phone call: "Mr. Nevelson is coming." Before he even came, I said, "You know, Mother, Mr. Nevelson is coming and he's going to propose to me this evening, and I'm accepting him." I don't think the poor woman knew what I was even talking about, but it happened that way. He came and he proposed, and said, "Well, you can still go to art school," and he was very sympathetic with me. I've always thought I just superimposed the whole thing on him. See, you want something badly enough, you can just somehow make it happen.

I made a beeline in my life for art. I went to art school all my life. I went to Europe and studied with Hans Hofmann in 1931 before he came to America. It's like the people who swim in the ocean; there are some who swim and some who drown. I never had any problems. When I came to New York, I went to the Art Students League. The first week I was there, they put my drawings on the wall. I had one hundred-plus wherever I went. There's something about me …. See, you have to have an awareness of where you want to

go, who you want to associate with, then you work toward projecting that.

I was the only American artist that Karl Nierendorf showed in his gallery in the thirties. He said, "Look, Nevelson, with your sensibilities, you'd be great in Paris. That's where Picasso and all the boys, Matisse …"—he knew them all. And I said no. I was brought up in this country, this pioneer country, it's still a young country, and I like the feeling of being a pioneer in this country, and I am. I think I made some rather good choices. Right along, they worked for me. New York was right for me because I had all this energy.

I didn't go away summer or winter. I happen to like warm weather here, so I never went away, I never went to an art colony to stay. I didn't want that because, well, I'd already lived in a very expensive way and they were struggling, and it just didn't fit me. When I first came to New York, if you were an artist, you lived in Greenwich Village and you were a bohemian. That meant free. What did you do? You lived down there and you put on a beret. Wasn't that a uniform? That didn't appeal to me. I did it my way, I guess. I didn't want to be part of a community of artists. It didn't interest me.

I dressed like a queen, even then. I always dressed, and my family always saw that I could have very beautiful clothes. People thought if you looked like that and you already had expensive and gorgeous, expensive clothes and jewelry and everything, how could you use old woods in your work? There probably wasn't one person on Earth that understood what I was doing. At the time, you see, the work was different—old wood, nails, mirrors, and glass, all the goddamn things.

After my first exhibition was over, I destroyed all the work I'd done. What else could I do? I didn't have a nickel. I had no place to store it, I never sold anything, so what was I to do? Kill myself? I had no choice at that time. I guess it was nearly forty years ago. I never would ask anyone for anything, so it was a struggle. Anyway, I did destroy them. All I have are a few photos of the work.

It wasn't too long after that that I began showing at Nierendorf. I still struggled. No one knows how much I struggled. The work was all right. I could do that, but, yes, there were depressions. "At sea, at sea, what can it be that I remain so long at sea?" Yes, but I pulled

out. I hunted and found a few notes that have sustained me for the rest of my life.

I had a son. The agonies were economic, guilts about motherhood …. I think the greatest guilt of all is having children without thinking too much. I was thinking, but we didn't have the pill. I did everything, but I think I was too healthy. And you pay a price. Some of us are not ready to be mothers. I've never been ready. My son is fifty-six and I still feel guilty, but I've done a great deal to overcompensate him for this. I was young. I hadn't had any experience with sex. Well, it was just difficult for me to confront this. I wouldn't, and I had a cesarean because I couldn't face it.

The point is that even to this day, who has the courage to really give life to another person? Don't you think that's a great responsibility? People have said to me, "Well, aren't you glad that you were born?" and I'll say, "Well, if I wasn't, I wouldn't know the difference."

What I see about humanity makes me a pessimist. But in my work, I'm an optimist. Look at humanity, look at what's happening on this Earth. I think anyone who takes the attitude that they can do something that will change the world is very naive. For instance, I've taught art. I'll say to my students, "Well, what do you want?" "I want perfection," they say. I say, "Well, who in the hell do you think you are that you can demand perfection?" It's nonexistent, anyway.

Words like "ruthless" and "sacrifice" are kind of false judgments. You don't do it that way. When you have labor pains, you don't say, "Could I have done it this way or that way?" You go into labor. Those words belong to what we call three dimensions. I didn't think like that. Living the way I did … see, I broke all the traditions. If I wanted a lover, I had a lover. I didn't have to get married again. So, I had courage to live as I understood it. I thought that art was more important than other things. I work for myself. It was only because I had so little confidence in the world that I wanted to build my own world—not the world, my world.

When I found the cube, it stabilized me. I didn't have to flounder. And really, it's not fashionable at this moment to give credit to the cube, but having studied metaphysics, and recognizing the cube, it gave me my terra firma because I can understand the cube in

space. It has been said that Picasso discovered the cube. Now, if you study metaphysics, it has its own symbols. And the cube is the highest form that the human being has come to. First, in consciousness, you have a dot, then you have a line, then you have the square. Then you project it into a cube. That is as far as the human species can go.

So, Picasso, maybe without even knowing metaphysics, still was brilliant enough to move into the cube. Beethoven uses the octave, and out of those eight notes, he makes a world of sound. Now, that's harmony. And that's what "environment" meant to me. I don't need eight notes. Give me one or two notes, and I can work on it and I'm satisfied. That gives me my structure. There is no limit to those one or two notes, because there's variation on a theme, unlimited variations on a theme. I can go back to the variation of one theme and that's my consciousness. So, I stand on the strength of that. Nothing has been able to shake me. I don't think anything could have stopped me from doing my art. I stopped working for a little while and I'd get abscesses and boils, I'd get sick. See, the machinery—if you're a Rolls-Royce, you can't be walking, you've just got to be riding.

I can't say it's possible to do what I've done without going through periods of despair. I only know I drank, and I also knew that somewhere when I would come out, it sensitized me. It often gave me a kind of moment of rest. I don't say that you have to drink all the time, but I think without it, I would have gone off a little crazy. So, it was like you'd fall and there was like a clothesline that kind of kept you from going down.

We hear so much about the material and the spiritual, the soul and the body. I do not want to make a division. I feel it's all one. In Oriental philosophy, they say there isn't a world, that we project a world. I needed this philosophy to live or I'd kill myself. I don't give a damn if it's right or wrong. It suits me and I like it. That's enough for me.

Now, I don't make moral distinctions like this is a lie and this is the truth. If a lie is going to sustain me, I will kiss it and welcome it. I read that Napoleon said, "You stoop to conquer." I always felt like a nice American wooden Indian. My knees wouldn't give. I always thought it would be easier to steal than beg. That's where your pride comes in. So, I got a few keys that have been able to sustain me and helped. Anyone who's in such despair, I'm sure they will hunt for them. Some people go to religion, some to analysis, some to

medicine; I don't care what they go to, but if they need it, fine. If it will help them, what's the difference?

So, looking back, I saw that I knew what I wanted and I felt that I had the tools to fulfill it. The work I do I've done basically for me. Why? Because I wanted to give meaning to my life. It's the very best way I know how to live my life. How else could I live it?

I live pretty much as I want to. I don't want to have a lot. I've had all kinds of jewelry; I had diamond bracelets before I was twenty. I've had great collections—American Indian pottery, African art. I've tasted of almost everything on Earth. It has not changed my life because it all came at a certain time when I was ready. Do you realize how few rich people create? They don't have to. Art is a struggle. I call it a spiritual labor pain.

When I did the series of etchings called *Essences*, I was already in my late seventies. I went to the studio for two weeks. I was just going to make one or two etchings. I was so excited, I stayed probably a year and made thirty-six editions. And if someone had come and given me the world, I wouldn't have taken it. It was so exciting to me.

I called them *Essences* because I didn't use the technique of drawing, of painting, or any technique. First, I had the materials. I've used laces for forty years, but it was the weight and the placement that were new. So, in other words, my technique had nothing to do with the concept of what has been done in the past with drawing and painting and sculpture.

I feel that the *Essences* are like a breath. Now, darling, we have our body, but it's the breath … you know, people die because their lungs get filled with water and they can't breathe, and that is the end. The Essences gave me probably the closest feeling of where I wanted to go. It's like perfume. Think of what we have to do to get an ounce of perfume. That is what these *Essences* are to me. They're as close … it's almost all consciousness, and you see, it's kind of a bouquet to myself. Did I take this breath yesterday or a minute ago? Look, it's a new breath, it's always new, and you do add, from minute to minute, you do add a little more awareness, yes, as long as you live. Otherwise, we'll cease living.

In those *Essences*, I wanted to get a quality, something like ethereal, and I did to a point. Now I want to carry it to a whisper. Because I think a whisper can be stronger, an atom can be stronger than a whole mountain.

Now, when you're eighty, no matter how you slice it, things have happened. I'm living my life pretty much as I wanted to. Nevertheless, you know nature is very bright, and when you get to be this age, it plays its part, too. Nature is still a mystery.

I didn't see too much happiness. I lived alone almost my whole adult life. Now, that doesn't mean alone. I've always had help around me. But I mean marriage—it's difficult without that. It's a partnership. Of course, one always has friends, and the older I got, the more interesting friends I had, still have. I really don't regret too much. I've been too busy. It's been constructive, so how can I regret anything? I give myself a one hundred-plus for the way I've lived my life, the choices I've made, what has come out of it. Every day I've lived, I wanted to flower more and more and more.

We don't have everything. I thought my mother was the most beautiful woman on Earth, but she shouldn't have been married. She was totally misplaced. She used rouge in Rockland, Maine when no one rouged. She used to wear feather hats when no one wore them. She was misplaced and unhappy. I thought, when I was growing up, with my abilities and appearance and everything, that I should have a place that would suit me. It's like a setting you want. It's the harmony I'm looking for. Well, I never had that. I've never lived in a place that I really want, even now. Now it's too late and I don't want to bother. So, I made *Mrs. N's Palace*. I just projected that and I created my world.

Author's Note

BY LYNN GILBERT

As the author of *Particular Passions*, I am updating what I feel has been overlooked. In 1981, when *Particular Passions* was first published, five years after its conception, it was presented as a book that would inspire. Almost half a century later, I realize this book is much more. It is a historic record of trailblazing women who shaped the American landscape.

A group of pioneering women in multiple disciplines emerged in the mid-1970s. Some gained recognition and even fame. Others remained in the shadows but had an equal impact. Over time, women moved into the workforce and emerged in significant roles. It was no longer unusual.

We are moving backwards, unfortunately. Women are being stripped of their rights, even by the highest court.

There was no list of women of achievement in the mid-1970s. This book records, for the first time, these pioneers. Listen to their stories, struggles, and achievements in their own words.

Enjoy this Louise Nevelson chapter.

Lynn Gilbert

APRIL 3, 2024

Postface

BY LYNN GILBERT

In 1976, when I was asked to photograph Louise Nevelson for the Pace Gallery, I went to her studio to meet her and was dazzled. Her house on Spring Street was very spare but very ordered. One could see the disciplined structure that dictated the way she lives. Surrounded by the amazing work of her own hands, she created her own atmosphere, her own environment. That day, she had an extraordinary outfit on—a Chinese robe over an American couture gown. A silver African necklace around her neck, a black velvet riding hat, those clodhopper space shoes. The effect was bizarre, yet right. Feeling the tremendous energy and focus of her personality, I was deeply moved.

Back home after the session, I said to myself: There are other women like her who have created something extraordinary and enriched life for themselves and others. Who are they? How were they able to develop themselves and make their astonishing contributions to society? The idea of photographing them and doing brief profiles took form in my mind.

My first task was deciding whom I would include. *Who's Who* was the logical place to start, but I found that the entries only provided information on positions held and awards won; it was impossible to assess the real contributions and far-reaching effects of the subjects. I knew I was in for a lot of research. Plunging in, I used the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* and began reading any and every article on a woman or women I could lay my hands on. When an article mentioned a woman who I thought might be considered, I would follow up on that.

Eventually, I found lists of outstanding women that had been compiled in popular magazines, and realized that the lists themselves were new to arrive on the scene. Only in the early seventies did the almanacs, of which there are many, begin to compile lists of distinguished women. In the mid-1970s, *Fortune* magazine wrote its first full-scale article on women in finance and industry, followed by one in *BusinessWeek*. The most thoroughly researched list to appear in any of the women's magazines was published in 1971 by the *Ladies' Home Journal*. According to the author, the 75 Most Important Women were the "women who had made the greatest impact on our civilization within the last five years and would continue to affect us significantly for the next five years." The author added that it is a "representative list that speaks highly for the quality of feminine leadership in America." But it was interesting to see that the positions of a number of women on this list were predicated on their relationships to men of national or international importance. Included were

Rose Mary Woods, "Executive Secretary to President Nixon since he became senator," Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, "widow of President Kennedy and wife of a Greek near-billionaire—the woman most other women would like to be," and Rose Kennedy. I wanted my list, in contrast, to include only women whose contributions had come from their own energies and endeavors. My criterion would be women who had done pioneering work in their field that had significantly changed society and/or opened up a new field for women.

When I had exhausted the *Readers' Guide*, I consulted experts in the fields of art, medicine, science, law, and so forth, and asked them for their recommendations. I finally created a master list of women, with a second column consisting of the writers, editors, and experts who could help me assess the subjects' contributions. I decided that each subject would need at least three referrals by solid sources in order to be included.

Throughout the selection process, I tried to be receptive to the information I was being given. When I was compiling a list of Black women, for instance, the women who were repeatedly suggested to me were almost exclusively in the field of civil rights. I checked my own impulse to find a Black writer, a Black scientist. Any list is necessarily somewhat arbitrary. But by feeling my way, I tried to be true to the names that continued to emerge with the most insistence. I finally arrived at a list of over fifty women.

Several of the women, among them Marian Anderson, Martha Graham, Susan Sontag, and Susan Langer, who indisputably should have been included in such a book, preferred not to be. There were several others, including Jane Jacobs, the architect and city planner, whom I was not able to reach. Lillian Hellman agreed to be photographed for the book, but not interviewed. I photographed three women—Margaret Mead, Cecelia Payne-Gaposchkin, and Aileen Osborn Webb—who were not interviewed before their deaths. Dorothy Height and Dede Allen could not be included for reasons beyond our control. Therefore, the forty-six women included here do not represent a definitive list, but rather a sampling of the scope and significance of women's contributions to American society over the last fifty years.

At this point, I envisioned the book as portraits of the women, each accompanied by a brief text. I hoped my photographs could portray each woman with dignity, and hoped to catch a gesture, a glint in the eye, or some small detail that would enable me to go beyond their public and sometimes well-known image and capture an essential inner quality. To put my subjects at ease during the photography sessions, I prepared by reading published interviews and profiles and their own books and articles, and as we talked, many of the women told me stories I had not seen in print. I went home and wrote down everything I could remember, but it was not long before I realized that these stories were more compelling than the primarily visual book

I had planned. I felt that if I could understand these women, how they function in our society, it would not only help me understand my own life, but perhaps help others.

I wanted the text accompanying the photographs to reflect the style of my portraits: to be revealing, yet written with honesty, dignity, and kindness. As the book evolved, I needed a writer who would go back to the women, gain their trust, listen to the stories I had heard, and go beyond. Again, I relied on research—interviews and profiles—to find a journalist with a sensibility compatible with mine.

Particular Passions turned into a collaboration when I read an interview of Elsa Peretti by Gaylen Moore for the *New York Times Magazine*. I said to myself: This is the first writer of profiles who knows what a person is really about. We proceeded slowly and surely, coping with the difficult logistics of interviews, writing, and editing. This idea of mine took five years to fulfill, and with the collaboration of Gaylen Moore, it has resulted in a book far richer than any I could have imagined.

I hope that our book will not only add to the feminist literature of our time, but will inspire women everywhere to pursue their own particular passions.

Acknowledgments

There are many people I wish to acknowledge for having made this book possible.

Thanks to Arne Glimcher, founder of the Pace Gallery, who entrusted me with photographing Louise Nevelson after I photographed his children. My experience with Nevelson was the pivotal moment that shaped the direction of my life and the inspiration for this book.

I would like to thank the subjects, who gave of their time, and shared the previously unpublished stories of their lives that make this book so rich.

Without the encouragement of my husband, Ronnie, our sons, Paul and George, and my beloved housekeeper, Lessie Freeman, I'm not sure I could have tolerated the endless roadblocks during the five years that it took to complete this book.

My aunt and uncle, Red and Pick Heller, jump-started the book by arranging my first subjects.

To Gaylen Moore, my writer, I owe my deepest gratitude. After firing the first writer during a search that lasted a year and a half, I interviewed thirty writers before I found the person who would share my vision. I wanted the shared stories to be the basis of my book. Gaylen returned to interview and record their voices, to let you feel as if you were in each person's presence.

The editor, Carol Southern at Clarkson Potter, did a superb job. Her faith, and that of publisher Jane West, enabled me, against all odds, to get this book published. Anne Goldstein, assistant editor, was so moved by the book that it enabled her to leave publishing to follow her own "particular passion."

I received encouragement in the book's early stages from Audrey Adler, a literary agent. Among the most helpful in finding a writer were Michael and Ann Loeb and their friend Dick Brickner; Arthur Loeb of the Madison Avenue Bookshop; Harriet Lyons of *Ms.*; and Richard De Combray, who kept the project going when it might have come to a dead end.

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Women of Wisdom Series

EXCERPTED FROM

Particular Passions: Talks With Women Who Have Shaped Our Times

BY LYNN GILBERT

ACTIVISM

CIVIL & WOMEN'S RIGHTS
Betty Friedan
Ruth Bader Ginsburg
Gloria Steinem
Addie Wyatt

LAW
Eleanor Holmes Norton

SPORTS
Billie Jean King

ARTS & CULTURE

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Reviews

“

“One of those rare, rare books that pick your life up, turn it around, and point it in the right direction.”
— K.T. Maclay

“Every woman owes it to herself to look up *Particular Passions: Talks With Women Who Have Shaped Our Times*—borrow the volume from your public library. Or, better still, buy it and put it with your favorite novel or poetry collection to sustain you. Every story in the book is an inspiration. This book is a joy and a tonic.”
— St. Paul Pioneer Press

“Tantalizing glimpses into the lives of women who have not only made a living at their own ‘particular passion,’ but have become well known, even world-renowned, for doing work they love.”
— Christian Science Monitor

“A forceful inspiration—a revelation of woman’s courage, spirit, and strength.”
— Sey Chassler, Editor in Chief, Redbook

“This is a wonderful book … The book is recommended reading for anyone—no matter what political or sociological background—who wants to know more about living history.”
— Santa Cruz Sentinel

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