

On View: The Early Promise of Alex Katz

How the maverick artist developed his signature style



'Bather' from 1959. PHOTO: ALEX KATZ/VAGA, NEW YORK, NY

By

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“**What are you** doing painting figuratives?” a young woman asked Alex Katz about his canvases featuring bold, colorful human forms in 1957. (That woman, a research biologist named Ada, later became his wife.) Back then, when Mr. Katz was in his mid-20s, such works were a daring departure from the reigning abstract expressionism. “I really was out there,” says Mr. Katz, now 89, who adds that the paintings “look a lot better to me now than they did when I did them.”

A new exhibit at the Cleveland Museum of Art, “Brand-New & Terrific: Alex Katz in the 1950s,” showcases the development of his signature style. Today, Mr. Katz is known for his bright, bold portraits of people, often with mysterious expressions. But it took a while for his work to find an audience.

In the early part of the decade, Mr. Katz was struggling, says curator Mark Cole—painting houses, doing carpentry and carving frames because he couldn’t make a living from his artwork. By the end of the decade, Mr. Katz started simplifying his compositions and crystallizing his style. “Throughout the decade, the big development you see is he really forges an ingenious way to wed abstraction with recognizable imagery,” says Mr. Cole.

Many of the 70 pieces in the exhibit have never been shown before. Organized chronologically, they trace the evolution of Mr. Katz’s work from paintings of group scenes and collages to more minimal canvases.

The artist developed another habit early on: painting his wife, Ada, who would eventually be the subject of more than 250 of his works. Two in the show include “Bather” and “Ada in a Blue Sweater,” both from 1959.

Mr. Katz continues to paint in the same style of those midcareer and later portraits. Every morning, he says, he goes for a run and does 300 push-ups, 200 sit-ups and 200 half-sit-ups. He and Ada live in New York and in Lincolnville Beach, Maine—where he painted her as “Bather” almost six decades ago. It takes him about an hour and a half to complete a painting, he says, and “she’d sit there like a saint, bored out her mind.”

A. ‘Bather’ (1959, pictured above). Mr. Katz painted this portrait of Ada the year after they got married. “Their relationship is one of the great art-world relationships,” says Mr. Cole. With wide expanses of blue that merge the sea and the sky, this painting makes a step toward his later, more reductive compositions. At the same time, the lack of a horizon line, save for the thin scrim of land, points to his early collage works, says Mr. Cole, which were made up of areas of flat color with distinct edges.

B. 'Wildflowers in a Vase' (1954-1955). In the late 1950s, Mr. Katz made collages to relax after a long day of painting, cutting up pieces of paper and assembling them into shapes. Juxtaposing defined areas of bright color became part of his aesthetic. Though the collages were small, they influenced his larger canvases, says Mr. Cole.



'Wildflowers in Vase' (1954-1955). PHOTO: ALEX KATZ/VAGA, NEW YORK, NY

C. **'Four People' (1953-1954).** In the early 1950s, Mr. Katz often used photographs as guides for his painting—another practice frowned upon by his contemporaries. “He was doing this at a time when that was a big no-no,” says Mr. Cole. “Artists were supposed to paint from their subconscious.”



'Four People' (1953-1954). PHOTO: ALEX KATZ/VAGA, NEW YORK, NY

To paint this composition of four people, Mr. Katz started with a black-and-white photo borrowed from a friend. The blank, featureless faces are typical of his early 1950s style. “He was interested in the shape more than any extraneous detail,” says Mr. Cole. “Over the decade he inserts more eyes and noses.”