



For Immediate Release

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***Founding Friendships: Celebrating the Legacies of
Elizabeth Kray and Stanley Kunitz***

On View Through October 9 at Poets House in New York

A 25th Anniversary Celebration in Artwork and Archives Has Its Foundation in Social Circles and Friendship

Every art movement is a testimonial, at bottom, to the vitality of a complex of friendships.

— Stanley Kunitz, 1965

Poets House is proud to launch *Founding Friendships: Celebrating the Legacies of Elizabeth Kray and Stanley Kunitz*, an unparalleled exhibition of art works by leading post-war artists, as well as archival material by major poets. The show gives visitors a glimpse into the social circles and friendships that underpinned one of New York's great creative eras and sheds light on the ethos that shaped the founding of Poets House over 25 years ago.

The exhibition includes *A Poet's Circle* — a selection of works by artists closely associated with two-time U.S. Poet Laureate Stanley Kunitz (1905-2006), featuring works by **Robert Motherwell, Philip Guston, Jack Tworkov, Saul Steinberg** and **Chaim Gross**, among many others. Additionally, a companion show, *Bettissima: Treasures from the Elizabeth Kray Archives*, showcases never-before-seen letters from E.E. Cummings, W.H. Auden and other literary luminaries.

Stanley Kunitz and his wife, the painter and poet Elise Asher, were at the center of a warm circle of friends in New York City and Provincetown, MA. And, at the center of *A Poet's Circle*, curated by Jason Andrew, is their dinner party book, which records the visual artists, poets and writers, the likes of Mark Rothko, Philip Roth and Lillian Hellman, who sat around their table at dinners in their Greenwich Village apartment from 1965 to 1978. All of the painters in the exhibition can actually be traced to specific dinner events documented in the journal.

“By and large I prefer the company of painters and poets to that of poets, who tend to be rather surly and withdrawn,” Stanley Kunitz wrote. “...Artists flock to the metropolis mainly because the museums and the galleries and the money are there, but also, I propose, because they are temperamentally gregarious. Every art movement is a testimonial, at bottom, to the vitality of a complex of friendships.”

The companion exhibition, *Bettissima* (translation: “most Betty!”), gets its title from a letter written from E.E. Cummings to the visionary arts administrator and imaginative inventor of poetry programs and initiatives Elizabeth Kray (1916-1987). “shame shame and tripleshame on lessthanworthless me for letting you so quite irrevocably triumph over the utterlyAndHowdefeated undersigned!!!” he wrote in the letter. In this show, visitors are treated to a glimpse of Kray through numerous other never-

before-seen letters, documents and other archival material from W.H. Auden, T.S. Eliot and Galway Kinnell, among others, a must-see for any poetry lover.

Before founding Poets House with Kunitz in 1985, Kray served as director of both the Academy of American Poets and the Poetry Center of the 92nd Street Y. During her tenure, she developed original and often landmark programs, including the Poets-in-the-Schools program, national tours for poets, the first reading tours of foreign poets in the United States, and the commissioning of American poets to translate foreign language poetry. She also authored several literary-historic walking tours, including several of Walt Whitman's Manhattan. As Kunitz noted, "With her unique mixture of idealism and common sense, she was the moving spirit behind most of the programs and activities that have made New York the poetry capital of the United States and an international poetry center."

This exhibition, drawn from Kray's archives now housed at Poets House, represents her many powerful contributions to American culture, ranging from fierce speaking agent and impassioned arts administrator to tender friend and an advocate for the power of poetry to transform lives. She supported young writers and befriended poets working across a wide aesthetic spectrum. Letters from acclaimed poets — including Elizabeth Bishop, Jane Cooper, George Oppen and James Wright — reveal how important Betty Kray was to them as a friend, editor and guide. It's no surprise that her final project was the creation of Poets House, a meeting place for poets, and an enduring testament to Kray's own personal vision: that poetry is at the heart of our culture.

"These twinned exhibitions celebrate the circles of connection and conversation that were so crucial to the founding of Poets House," said Executive Director Lee Briccetti. "The relationships that bring poetry to its audience are often social in nature and these delightful shows demonstrate the social networks that are built into the energies and affections of this house."

Poets House is grateful for support from The Dedalus Foundation for Founding Friendships: Celebrating the Legacies of Elizabeth Kray and Stanley Kunitz.

Poets House is a national poetry library and literary center that invites poets and the public to step into the living tradition of poetry. Poets House — through its poetry resources and literary events — documents the wealth and diversity of modern poetry and stimulates public dialogue on issues of poetry in culture. Founded in 1985 by poet Stanley Kunitz and arts administrator Elizabeth Kray, the over-50,000-volume library has created a home for all who read and write poetry. Now celebrating its 25th anniversary, Poets House is brimming with readers, writers, children's class trips and program audiences. For more information about this event and Poets House in general, or visit poetshouse.org, and join us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

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