Susanne Katherina Knauth Langer (1895–1985) was a German-American philosopher. As the daughter of German emigrants, Langer primarily spoke German as a child. Raised in proximity to New York City’s cultural resources, she developed the interest in symbols and aesthetic forms that would mark her philosophy. Langer did not start college until she was twenty. Her father discouraged his daughters from seeking higher education, and only after his death and through her mother's help did she attend Radcliffe, graduating in 1920. Langer obtained her Ph.D. in philosophy from Harvard University in 1926, studying with Alfred North Whitehead. She continued at Harvard as a tutor for sixteenyears (1927-1942). Later she held positions at the University of Delaware (1943), the Dalton School (1944–1945), New York University (1945–1946), Columbia University (1945–1950), Northwestern University (1951), Ohio State University (1951), the University of Washington (1952–1953), the New School (1950), the University of Michigan (1954), and Wesleyan University (1954). Finally, in 1954, after publishing four significant books and only six years prior to her appointment to the American Academy of Arts and Science, Langer received her first tenured appointment, at Connecticut College, then a women's college. She taught and wrote there from 1954 until 1962. In her later years (1962–1985), she lived in a farmhouse in Olde Lyme, Connecticut where her research was funded by the Edward J. Kauffmann Foundation. She died at the age of eighty-nine, only three years after her final book appeared.

Although Langer was a philosopher, her insights on symbols, myth, and aesthetic experience made her influential throughout all of the humanities and many of the social sciences. Langer's early writing particularly demonstrates her early insights into symbols and their relationship to human potential. Influenced by Alfred North Whitehead's earlier work on symbols, Langer's *Practice of Philosophy* (1930) considers the nature of revolutionary thinking, anticipating paradigm theories of science. *An Introduction to Symbolic Logic* (1937) argues that logic is a concept central to philosophy, not mere tautology, but part of meaning.

Langer's mature work begins with *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (1942). Here she names the symbolic as the defining mark of humanity and develops a theory that originates symbolic action in feeling rather than logic. In doing so, she frees the binaries of mind and body, reason and impulse, autonomy and law. According to *Philosophy in a New Key*, from bodily sensation (sense data), human minds constantly abstract the forms that affect them. Symbols are more than communicative devices or descriptions of the empirical world; the brain ceaselessly constructs them, as evidenced by dreams, religious experience, art, ritual, and even science. For Langer, symbols worked as an end and an instrument, simultaneously a human trait, creation, and compulsion. All of human conceptions are only held through symbols. While the biological and social origin of the symbolic is inflected differently in myth, religion, art, or science, the human drive to symbolize characterizes every form, and they are equally human acts of meaning-making.

Her study of human emotion, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (1953) both extends the symbolic into forms that are less linguistic and offers a fuller account of expression and reception. *Feeling and Form* extends the example of music to develop an aesthetic theory that includes the place of time, virtual space, magic, poesis, and traumatic forms. She argues that art is a symbolic form that, through its dynamic structure, expresses the forms of experience that language is unfit to convey. Language—limited by its discursive, sequential form—cannot express the emotional content as eloquently and accurately as presentational forms, such as music and painting. The creation of aesthetic forms, however, is not solely an emotional experience. Langer describes their creation as an intellectual act of understanding and objectifying emotions. The artist expresses ''not his own actual feeling, but what he knows about human feeling.'' When artists possess a rich symbolism, they can use that knowledge to exceed personal experience.

Langer's philosophy is often connected to that of the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer. Although they were friends—she translated Cassirer's *Language and Myth* (1946)—too frequently their philosophical systems are collapsed. This enfolding loses their fruitful distinctions to the detriment of each. Unlike Cassirer, who values science over art, and reason and numbers over feeling and language, Langer offers a nonhierarchical model of symbolic forms, one based in biological evolution (*Mind*, 1967–1982), and further she eschews the communication model of language, instead she conceiving language as primarily creative, forming and expressing concepts. Significantly, Langer developed a full and robust aesthetic theory and, through it, a more complex sense of symbolic reception and production.

Langer's own influence has been significant if under-recognized. Although women scholars, particularly philosophers, faced resistance in the mid-twentieth century, Langer's books are widely read. Her work remains vital to philosophy, anthropology, rhetoric, theology, and aesthetics.

For a longer introduction to her intellectual life, see *American Philosophers before 1950*, edited by Philip B. Dematteis and Leemon B. McHenry (Farmington Hills, Mich., 2003), pp. 189–199.