



The Metropolitan Museum of Art

BULLETIN WINTER 1986/87



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# The Abstract Expressionists

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EUGENE VICTOR THAW

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The  
Metropolitan Museum  
of Art

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ON FEBRUARY 3 the Metropolitan Museum will open the Lila Acheson Wallace Wing for twentieth-century art. For the first time the Museum will have a permanent home for its collection of works dating from 1900 to the present: more than eight thousand paintings, works on paper, and pieces of sculpture, as well as a design and architecture collection. The wing is named for the cofounder of *Reader's Digest*, who in her long association with the Metropolitan became one of its single greatest benefactors. Mrs. Wallace, who died in 1984, donated the major portion of the funding for the construction of the building and for the endowment of its operating costs. We are also greatly indebted to New York City for a generous contribution to the construction of the wing, which was designed by Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates.

Well before the opening of the Lila Acheson Wallace Wing, the Metropolitan made a firm commitment to contemporary art. The Museum began collecting the art of its time by acquiring and commissioning works by the sculptor Rodin shortly after its founding in 1870. Other major early acquisitions were two Manets in 1889, Renoir's *Madame Charpentier and Her Children* in 1907, and Cézanne's *La Colline des Pauvres* from the landmark 1913 Armory Show. Purchase funds given by George A. Hearn in 1906 and 1911 (the latter in honor of his son Arthur) were designated for works by living American artists. In 1949 the Metropolitan received the Alfred Stieglitz Collection, which included works by such American Modernists as Dove and O'Keeffe and by the European artists Brancusi, Matisse, Picabia, and Picasso. In 1970 we established the Department of Twentieth Century Art, headed by Henry Geldzahler.

Under the guidance of William S. Lieberman, who became chairman in 1979, after the death of the consultative chairman, Thomas B. Hess, the department has been extremely fortunate to receive several outstanding gifts and

promised gifts of groups of works. The first, in 1981, was the promised gift of seventy-two works from Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman. This Chicago collection, renowned for its Abstract Expressionist paintings, dramatically strengthened the Museum's holdings of postwar art. Nine of Mrs. Newman's works are illustrated here, including de Kooning's *Attic* (fig. 19), one of the artist's finest paintings and one that has been at the Metropolitan since 1982. Several other gifts have greatly expanded our Abstract Expressionist collection—from Lee Krasner, the Mark Rothko Foundation, and from the family of the late Audrey and Thomas B. Hess—and these are represented in the *Bulletin* by impressively strong works by leading members of this New York school.

In 1982 Metropolitan received from the estate of Scofield Thayer the bequest of a major private art collection. It comprises 343 works, including paintings by Picasso, Braque, Munch, and Matisse, and was assembled between 1919 and 1924, when Thayer was editor of the literary magazine *The Dial*. Two years later, in 1984, Heinz Berggruen, a collector and art dealer living in Geneva, gave ninety works by Klee—a gift that makes the Metropolitan the second most important Klee center in the world. These donations have immeasurably enriched our holdings and make the task of building a more systematic and comprehensive twentieth-century collection less formidable.

We are grateful to Eugene Victor Thaw, coauthor with Francis V. O'Connor of the catalogue raisonné of Jackson Pollock, for having provided the text of this *Bulletin*. The solid scholarship that Mr. Thaw brings to his discussion of the Metropolitan Museum's Abstract Expressionists is further informed by his own broad experience as a dealer, collector, and critic.

Philippe de Montebello  
DIRECTOR

From about 1945 to 1950, the years immediately following the Second World War, in one of those mysterious transformations of cultural history, a small group of American painters working mostly in New York became the leading edge of avant-garde art and changed the direction of painting throughout the world. Although these artists did not form a stylistically cohesive group—and they insisted vehemently on their individuality—they nevertheless recognized themselves as a fraternity. They were mostly well acquainted with each other, and, with reservations, tended to acknowledge the various labels under which art critics and historians subsequently placed them: New York School, Action Painters, or, most commonly, Abstract Expressionists. The success attained by the work of the Abstract Expressionist painters caused many others to emulate them and, later, to react against them. Both the critics and the artists themselves subsequently differentiated “First Generation” Abstract Expressionists from those of the “Second Generation.” In this essay we are concerned with the so-called First Generation as they are represented in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Every book on the Abstract Expressionists contains a slightly different list of those who qualify for membership in the movement—lists determined by taste, bias, or arbitrary dates. The Department of Twentieth Century Art has its own list to define the First Generation, a list consisting of the

## Introduction

following fourteen artists, only two of whom are still alive:

Hans Hofmann	1880–1966
Bradley Walker Tomlin	1899–1953
Adolph Gottlieb	1903–1974
Mark Rothko	1903–1970
Arshile Gorky	1904–1948
Willem de Kooning	1904–
Clyfford Still	1904–1980
Barnett Newman	1905–1970
Lee Krasner	1908–1984
Franz Kline	1910–1962
William Baziotes	1912–1963
Jackson Pollock	1912–1956
Philip Guston	1913–1980
Robert Motherwell	1915–

Of course there are other artists represented in the Museum’s collection who could have been included: Jack Tworckov, for instance, James Brooks, or Richard Pousette-Dart and Ad Reinhardt. The Metropolitan owns work by each of these artists, whose careers overlapped the mainstream of Abstract Expressionism but were not central to its development. The list does include Arshile Gorky, who died in 1948, well before the Abstract Expressionists triumphed on the world art scene. Gorky was a precursor and a transitional figure, whose brilliant last years saw a rich outpouring of drawings and paintings that bridged the tremendous gap between sophisticated European Modernism and what had remained until then insular and provincial American styles. Hans Hofmann is not included in every art historian’s list of the First Generation: He was much older than the others, and was a European artist who had fully matured as a painter before arriving in the United States. He was, however, a stimulating teacher and a

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ARSHILE GORKY

*Landscape, 1933*

Oil on canvas

25 x 21 in.; 63.5 x 53.3 cm

Gift of Dr. Meyer A. Pearlman, 1964 (64.177)





ARSHILE GORKY

*Water of the Flowery Mill, 1944*

Oil on canvas

42¼ x 48¾ in.; 107.3 x 123.8 cm

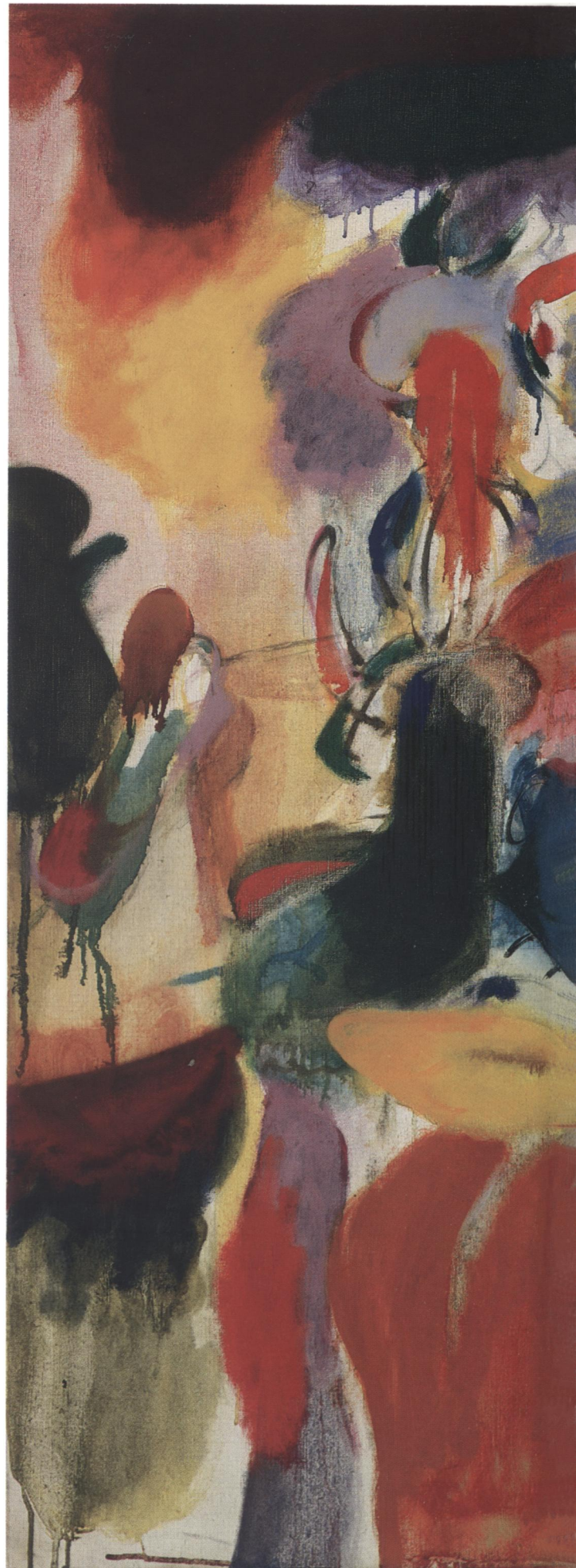
George A. Hearn Fund, 1956 (56.205.1)

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Although his pictures were  
composed carefully and deliberately,

Gorky achieved a look of  
unconscious expression and  
spontaneity through various  
strategies including thinning his  
paints.

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pervasive influence on many artists of the 1940s and 50s, and his own late work clearly became a part of the Abstract Expressionist aesthetic.

Of the Metropolitan's group, only Lee Krasner was an actual student in Hofmann's school. Now recognized as an important painter of the period, Krasner—the only woman among the fourteen artists we are discussing—lived with and was subsequently married to Jackson Pollock from 1942 until his death in 1956. Her own career and considerable talent were overlooked in most early critical surveys of Abstract Expressionism, because as the devoted wife of that difficult and troubled giant of the group she seemed to stand in his shadow. Today numerous historical exhibitions and new research have conclusively shown that her own work and her visual sensibility played an important role in Pollock's development, and that her forceful personality and keen intelligence were very much appreciated in New York School circles. (The Metropolitan possesses only a late painting by Krasner—as well as two drawings—so she will join Tworck, Brooks, Reinhardt, and Pousette-Dart in the epilogue to our survey.)

Among the rest of the artists on the Museum's list, other personal and strategic groupings that took place should be noted. Except for his marriage to Krasner, Pollock remained something of a loner. Although he knew most of the artists of the group quite well and was during a certain period their acknowledged leader, he belonged to no particular clique. He was also the first to leave New York City to settle and work far in the country (The Springs, East Hampton, Long Island—which in 1945 was very rural).




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3

WILLIAM BAZIOTES

*Dragon*, 1950

Oil on canvas

47¾ x 39¾ in.; 121.3 x 100.9 cm

Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, 1950 (50.27)

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4

PHILIP GUSTON

*The Performers*, 1947

Oil on canvas

48½ x 32¾ in.; 123.3 x 82.2 cm

Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, 1950 (50.32)

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De Kooning, Pollock's rival as leading painter of the group (and still his rival today in the loyalties of the divided camps of critics and art historians), was a close friend and, for a time, a disciple of Gorky, whose connections with traditional European painting were very strong. De Kooning's career shows a less radical break with the past than that of Pollock, Still, or Rothko. He too, like Pollock, moved to The Springs but much later—he was there intermittently during the 1950s and settled permanently in 1963.

Rothko, Gottlieb, Still, and Newman by no means constituted a coherent group, nor did their works resemble one another's, yet they did form a kind of coterie among the Abstract Expressionists by virtue of certain shared ideas about the act of painting and, more particularly, about the content or meaning of abstract art. These four had both philosophical and mystical aspirations; they tended to characterize the artist in the modern world as a kind of shaman or magician-priest who could restore our contact with primordial knowledge, and revitalize myths and beliefs that had been lost. The four artists in this subgroup leapt from early work of primarily documentary interest to a full-blown personal style or "image" that each maintained with only slight variations for the remainder of his life.

Like Pollock and de Kooning, Motherwell, the youngest of the Abstract Expressionists, has had a career marked by many complex developments and changes. His aesthetic homeland has always been the Cubist collage, as originated by Braque and Picasso just before the First World War. Indeed, in his taste and elegance, Motherwell is as much a





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ROBERT MOTHERWELL

*La Danse II, 1952*

Oil on canvas

60 x 76 in.; 152.4 x 193 cm

George A. Hearn Fund, 1953 (53.94)

performer in the tradition of French Modernism as he is an American postwar painter. His group of works called *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* constitutes his most pervasive and familiar motif, continuing to reappear as he develops other, dissimilar series. William Baziot, a lesser-known artist among these powerful colleagues, died at a relatively early age, only a few years after Pollock. His biomorphic imagery and the modest size of both his work and his ambition connect him to American between-the-wars abstractionists such as Arthur Dove, but he also fitted well into Peggy Guggenheim's circle of artists influenced by Surrealism. A poetic and elegant if peripheral figure in the group was Bradley Walker Tomlin (born in 1899, the oldest except for Hofmann), whose classic

semaphorlike sign pictures demonstrate to perfection one kind of allover pattern painting. Franz Kline, whose short and brilliant career was almost entirely contained within the decade of the 1950s, was noted for his powerful use of black and white, continuing and developing a theme already begun by de Kooning, Pollock, and Motherwell in the late 40s. Kline's dynamic and seemingly recklessly balanced black-and-white canvases owed something as well to sources in both earlier landscape paintings, such as Marsden Hartley's Maine log-jams and cataracts, and (despite the artist's denials) Japanese Zen calligraphy.

Philip Guston's career was certainly the most curious and problematic of any of the fourteen artists under consideration. He remained a traditional W.P.A.-trained academic artist longer perhaps than was considered seemly, turning to abstraction only in 1950. The sensitive brushwork of his brilliant early 50s paintings, akin to passages in late Monets, finally dissolved, and at the end of the 1960s Guston turned to a kind of strange, symbolic, cartoonlike figuration that has become influential in the aesthetic of figurative Postmodernism.





By gift and purchase, The Metropolitan Museum of Art has assembled a distinguished collection of the work of the First Generation. Other institutions have become famous for their holdings in this field, but the Metropolitan, not hitherto noted for its concentration in postwar art, now has a comprehensive representation of these painters that is probably second only to that of the Museum of Modern Art. The two greatest figures of the period, Pollock and de Kooning, are particularly well shown in the Metropolitan's collection, with several acknowledged masterworks. There remain, of course, gaps to be filled and areas to be expanded. There is only one painting by Gorky (plus an early sketch), but that landscape, a mature work, *Water of the Flowery Mill* (fig. 2), is certainly one of his most beautiful.

The collection boasts several fine Hofmanns. However, there are still no early collages by Motherwell, and no Krasners of her vintage years. The Metropolitan has splendid examples by Rothko, Kline, Still, Guston, Baziotes, and Gottlieb. A superb major Tomlin and a characteristic Barnett Newman were acquired by the Museum in 1953 and 1968 respectively, just before the deaths of both artists. In fact, the purchase policy of the Metropolitan with regard to this generation of artists is one of the curious footnotes to the cultural history of our times and one of the unsung glories of the Museum. Although looked upon in the past as a bastion of conservatism, picketed by advanced artists on occasion, and never really considered a factor in contemporary art, the Metropolitan,

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## The Metropolitan Museum Collection

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through the prodding and foresight of its curators—Robert Beverly Hale, Henry Geldzahler, Thomas B. Hess, and William S. Lieberman—acquired highly significant works by some of the group fairly early in the game. In 1950 Baziotes's painting of the same year, *Dragon* (fig. 3), was acquired as well as a transitional, still figurative 1947 painting by Guston, *The Performers* (fig. 4). Motherwell's Matisse-inspired *La Danse II* of 1952 (fig. 5) was bought the following year, while Gorky's superb *Water of the Flowery Mill* was an inspired and timely purchase in 1956, as was de Kooning's recently painted *Easter Monday* of 1955-56 (covers, fig. 36). Pollock, who died during the summer of 1956, had been represented in the Metropolitan's collection since 1952 by a black-and-white painting of the previous year. Robert Hale, who wanted this museum to have one of Pollock's four major mural-sized poured paintings, negotiated with the artist's widow and the Sidney Janis Gallery early in 1957, and in an act of courage, finally acquired the great *Autumn Rhythm* (fig. 7) for \$30,000 (which included a \$12,000 credit for the black-and-white canvas returned in the transaction). In 1957 that sum was an almost unheard of price for an American painting, and it was a quantum leap for the whole market for the Abstract Expressionists. After all, the greatest museum in the nation—and one of the greatest in the world—had given a vote of confidence to what was to some a wild and even subversive type of art. De Kooning, in a grudging tribute to Pollock's priority as an adventurer into new artistic terrain, was once quoted as saying "Jackson broke the ice." So one could also say of the Metropolitan's posthumous purchase of a Pollock that it

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6

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB

*Thrust*, 1959

Oil on canvas

108 x 90 in.; 228.5 x 274.5 cm

George A. Hearn Fund, 1959 (59.164)

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7

JACKSON POLLOCK

*Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)*, 1950

Oil on canvas; 105 x 207 in.; 266.6 x 525.6 cm

George A. Hearn Fund, 1957 (57.92)

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“broke the ice” and cleared the way for the subsequent prosperity of this postwar group among the world’s collectors, museums, and critics.

This responsive and sensitive collecting continued in 1959 with the purchase of Franz Kline’s *Black, White, and Gray* (fig. 8) and Adolph Gottlieb’s *Thrust* (fig. 6), both painted in the year of acquisition. Rothko’s *Untitled (Number 16)* (fig. 9) was purchased in 1971, shortly after the artist’s shocking suicide.

Such purchases were an important part of the Metropolitan’s acquisition program. However, as is the case with most major museums in this country, the greatest enrichment of the Museum has come through the initiative, taste, and generosity of enlightened private collectors. The representation of Abstract

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FRANZ KLINE

*Black, White, and Gray*, 1959

Oil on canvas

105 x 78 in.; 266.5 x 198 cm

George A. Hearn Fund, 1959 (59.165)

9

MARK ROTHKO

*Untitled (Number 16)*, 1960

102 x 119½ in.; 259.1 x 303.5 cm

Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, George A. Hearn Fund, and Hugo Kastor Fund, 1971 (1971.14)

Expressionism at the Metropolitan has reached its present level of significance primarily because of Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman’s legendary works, acquired by Mrs. Newman at the time they were painted, often directly from the artists who were her friends. Other important gifts, particularly the works of de Kooning from the family of the late Audrey and Thomas Hess and a group of paintings from the Mark Rothko Foundation, also greatly strengthened the Metropolitan’s holdings. The late Lee Krasner gave forty works on paper by Pollock to the Museum, which had previously purchased from her the artist’s pivotal 1943 painting, *Pasiphaë* (fig. 10).



JACKSON POLLOCK

*Pasiphaë*, 1943

Oil on canvas

56½ x 96 in.; 142.6 x 243.8 cm

Purchase, Rogers, Fletcher and Harris  
Brisbane Dick Funds and Joseph Pulitzer  
Bequest, 1982 (1982.20)

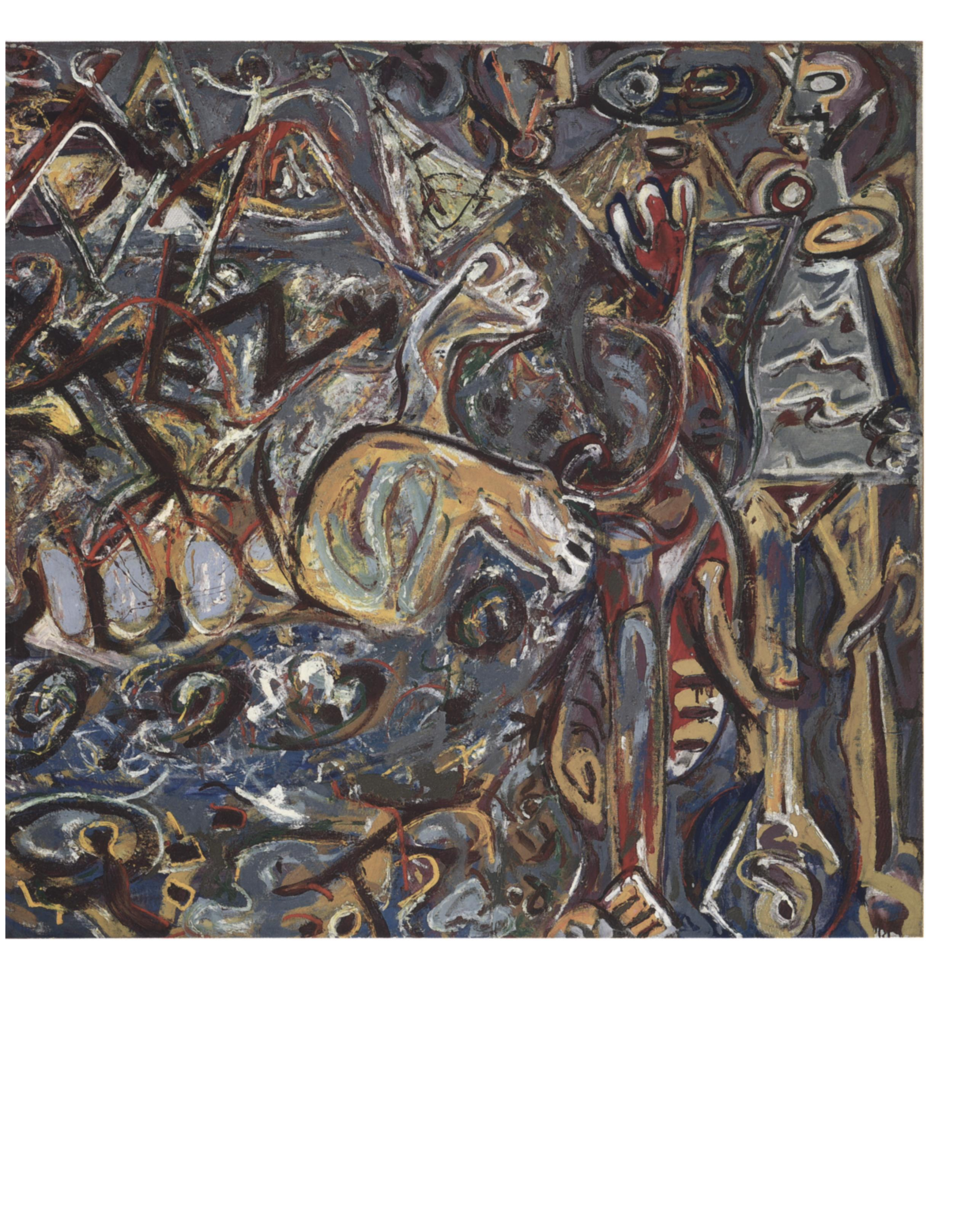
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Mythology, primitivism, Freud, and Jung  
combined with the energy and talent of the  
artist to make this the first true  
masterwork of Abstract Expressionism.

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ADOLPH  
GOTTLIEB



The end of the Second World War saw art in the United States changed in very significant ways. None of the fourteen artists being considered here served in uniform, nor did their subject matter or imagery relate directly to the war. However, the overwhelming sense of internationalism induced by the war itself, combined with the presence as refugees in New York of many major European Modernists, helped to overcome the vogue for the provincial Regionalist painters whose styles had dominated the 1930s. A considerable phalanx of Surrealists led by André Breton, the acknowledged high priest of the movement, took refuge in New York during the war years, and although most of them never learned English and remained apart from American life, they nonetheless had many points of contact with our art world and artists. Art of This Century, the gallery-museum that Peggy Guggenheim opened in New York in 1942, was one of the gathering places where such international cross-fertilization took place. Peggy Guggenheim, who had recently formed a stunning and comprehensive collection of European modern art, ranging from Cubism and early abstract art through Surrealism, was married to the painter Max Ernst. She was not only eager to collect and promote the best advanced American painters but was, moreover, willing to exhibit their works with Picassos, Mirós, and Arps, all together as Modernists, rather than separating Europeans and Americans as had been done formerly, even at the Museum of Modern Art. However, as much as we acknowledge that the émigré artists represented the opening of new possibilities and cultural maturity, we must not credit them with specific stylistic influences

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## American Painting Around 1945

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over most of the Abstract Expressionists. A statement by Jackson Pollock for a magazine interview in 1944 gives a clear idea of the relationship of the two groups:

I accept the fact that the important painting of the last hundred years was done in France. American painters have generally missed the point of Modern painting from beginning to end. (The only American master who interests me is Ryder.) Thus the fact that good European Moderns are now here is very important, for they bring with them an understanding of the problems of Modern painting. I am particularly impressed with their concept of the source of art being the Unconscious. This idea interests me more than these specific painters do, for the two artists I admire most, Picasso and Miro, are still abroad....

Picasso and Miró were, indeed, abroad, but their work was well known to our Abstract Expressionists. In as early as 1939 *Guernica* had been seen in New York and Picasso's 1907 landmark painting *Les Femmes d'Alger* had been acquired by Alfred H. Barr, Jr., for the Museum of Modern Art. Moreover, in 1939, the collection of Solomon Guggenheim was opened to the public in a Fifth Avenue town house (where Pollock was employed briefly as a guard). The 57th Street galleries of Pierre Matisse, Valentine Dudensing, Karl Nierendorf, and Curt Valentin regularly showed the great European Modernists they represented.

American art had, of course, demonstrated its own strong traditions of experimental Modernism since the Armory Show in 1913. The painters who exhibited at Alfred Stieglitz's galleries—291 and later An American Place—Demuth, O'Keeffe, Hartley, Marin, and

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11

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB

T, 1950

Oil on canvas

48 x 36 in.; 121.9 x 91.4 cm

Purchase, Mr. and Mrs. David M. Solinger Gift,  
1952 (52.213)

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This painting, one of a series called *Pictographs*, is a classic example of Gottlieb's sympathetic identification with primitive art.

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Dove, were, with the notable exception of O'Keeffe, at the end of their careers or dead by war's end. Throughout the late 1930s and into the 40s, the banner of Modernism and abstraction in painting was carried by such great individualists as Stuart Davis and by the American Abstract Artists, a group whose membership included very few of the young Abstract Expressionists (only Krasner, de Kooning, and Ad Reinhardt, a borderline figure in our group). The American Abstract Artists exhibited together annually and generally proselytized on behalf of a style of painting that was close to European Constructivism or hard-edged geometric abstraction. An important faction of the A.A.A. revered Piet Mondrian and painted derivations of his rectangular grids and primary colors. (Mondrian himself, who had emigrated to America in 1940, lived in New York until his death in 1944, and produced here the brilliant and influential late works culminating in *Broadway Boogie-woogie*, now in the Museum of Modern Art.) In 1942 the Metropolitan Museum

acquired *Prescience* (fig. 12) by Charles Howard, painted in that same year, which well demonstrates another type of sophisticated abstraction fashionable at that moment, with its strong Surrealist connections; but today this work seems somewhat emotionally arid.

As opposed to these abstractionists or Modernists who looked toward advanced European work, the majority of American artists throughout the decade preceding the war were dominated by the patriotic, anecdotal Regionalists, some of whom, like Grant Wood, occasionally

rose to real heights of poetic and emotive power. Thomas Hart Benton, a leading spokesman for the American Scene Regionalists, had himself been an abstract painter in his early years in Paris; but he subsequently recanted, and with almost religious fervor promoted a conservative pictorial art based largely upon so-called Renaissance and Baroque principles of drawing, applying these principles to a subject matter derived primarily from the American heartland. (Benton taught for some time at the Art Students League in New York, where Pollock became his student and friend in the early 1930s.) Another important group of pictorial conservatives were ideologists of the political left. William Gropper and the Mexican Alfaro Siqueiros, for example, produced programmatic "expressionist" works containing overt political messages.

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12

CHARLES HOWARD

*Prescience*, 1942

Oil on canvas

28¼ x 40½ in.; 71.8 x 102.9 cm

Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, 1942 (42.163)

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13

LEON KELLY

*Vista at the Edge of the Sea*, 1940

Oil on canvas

51 x 80 in.; 129.5 x 203.2 cm

Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, 1981 (1981.190)

During the period of the W.P.A. artists' programs many of these trends—the abstract, the regional, and the political—can be discerned as interweaving strands of stylistic and iconographic formations that remained part of the complex and confusing art world in New York through the mid-1940s.

Against this background, the Armenian-born Arshile Gorky emerged in 1943 as the first fully mature artist of the new American painting. His promising career was, however, tragically cut short; beset by illness and oppressed by deep psychological problems, he committed suicide in 1948. But in the short four-year period of his mature style, he successfully combined techniques from his long apprenticeship in early Modernism with the automatism he learned from Surrealism. By thinning his paints, he was better able to respond to the nuances of gesture, and even to accident, providing a model that freed American abstract painting from the tradition of geometric Neoplastic Constructivism. To be sure, recent research into Gorky's work has

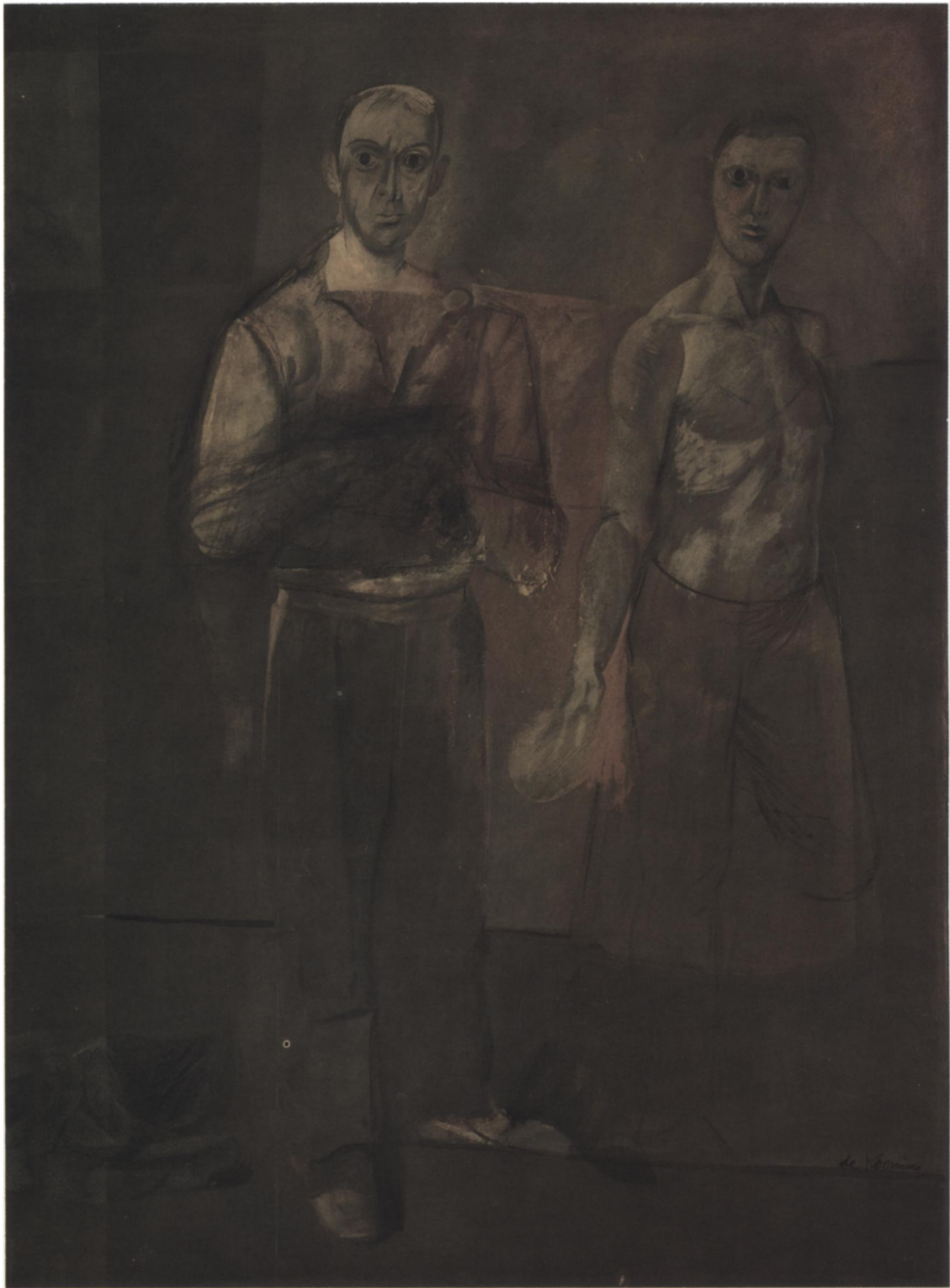
demonstrated that much of what has hitherto seemed pure abstraction, or at most vaguely discernable landscape motifs, was in fact strictly programmatic and finally readable. In the spirit of Pollock's dictum quoted by Lee Krasner, "I choose to veil the imagery," Gorky even earlier purposely disguised his specific subjects. The kind of detective work that reconstitutes the original imagistic armature of Gorky's art is biographically interesting, but it is not much help in bringing us close to the painting itself, to its real subject matter, which lies in the realm of making art and in the much more generalized emotional truths with

which art confronts us. Clement Greenberg, the early critical champion of Abstract Expressionism, described this relationship of apparent image to true subject best in an article on Surrealism in 1944, the year the Metropolitan's Gorky was painted. Using Miró's famous painting in the Philadelphia Museum of Art as an example, he wrote:

A dog barking at the moon is indicated by certain unmistakable signs, but they are in the nature of provocations to the artist's painterly imagination, which seizes upon the signs as excuse for elaborating shapes and colors which do not image anything possible even as an idea off the flat picture surface. The dog and moon become a springboard, not the subject of the work.

It is interesting to compare with Gorky's work a 1940 painting by a largely unsung American artist, Leon Kelly. Acquired by the Metropolitan Museum in 1981, his biomorphic abstraction called *Vista at the Edge of the Sea* (fig. 13), painted several





14

WILLEM DE KOONING

*Two Men Standing*, 1938

Oil on canvas; 61 x 45 in.; 154.9 x 114.3 cm

From the Collection of Thomas B. Hess, Purchase, Rogers, Louis  
V. Bell and Harris Brisbane Dick Funds and Joseph Pulitzer  
Bequest, 1984 (1984.612)

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years before Gorky's mature style developed, demonstrates that relationships in American art in the 1940s were more complex than we have been told and that some of those relationships are as yet unstudied.

Willem de Kooning was born in the Netherlands in 1904. Before his arrival in this country in 1926, he was trained thoroughly in the disciplines of European academic art schools. During his early years in New York, he was deeply influenced by his close friendship with Gorky. In fact, for a time the two men shared a studio. De Kooning's early work, of which the Metropolitan has notable examples (figs. 14, 16), shows the influence both of Gorky's famous *The Artist and His Mother* (The Whitney Museum of American Art), completed in 1936, and of those derivations of the neoclassical Picassos painted by John Graham, a Russian-born intellectual, mystic, and painter who had contacts with artistic circles in Paris (fig. 15). For de Kooning in the 40s, drawing was the crucial component of painting, and he consciously invoked the historic example of Ingres, by whom portrait drawing had been raised to the highest peak of intensity. In the 1944 *Seated Woman* (fig. 17), de Kooning, still in one sense a traditional European modern artist and still constructing pictures in a Cubist-organized space, brought to his work another aspect of his artistic personality—the startling creation of an icon of vulgarity. Here, partly under the influence of the 1930s Picasso, and like him emphasizing separate, identifiable parts of anatomy, de Kooning anticipates his own mature



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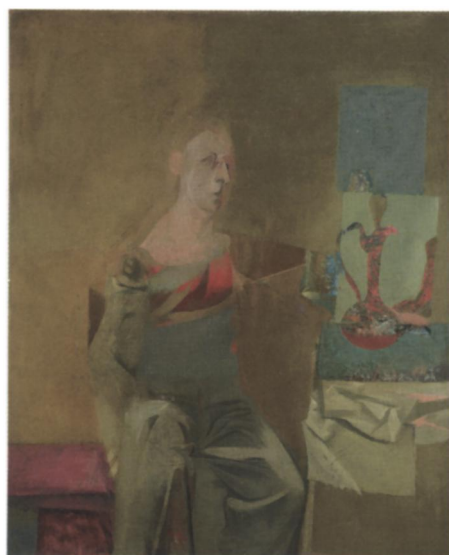
JOHN GRAHAM

*Celia*, c. 1944

Oil, casein, charcoal, chalk, pencil, pen and ink  
on masonite

48 x 36 in.; 121.9 x 91.4 cm

Hugo Kastor Fund, 1968 (68.185)



16

WILLEM DE KOONING

*The Glazier*, 1940

Oil on canvas; 54 x 44 in.; 137.2 x 111.8 cm

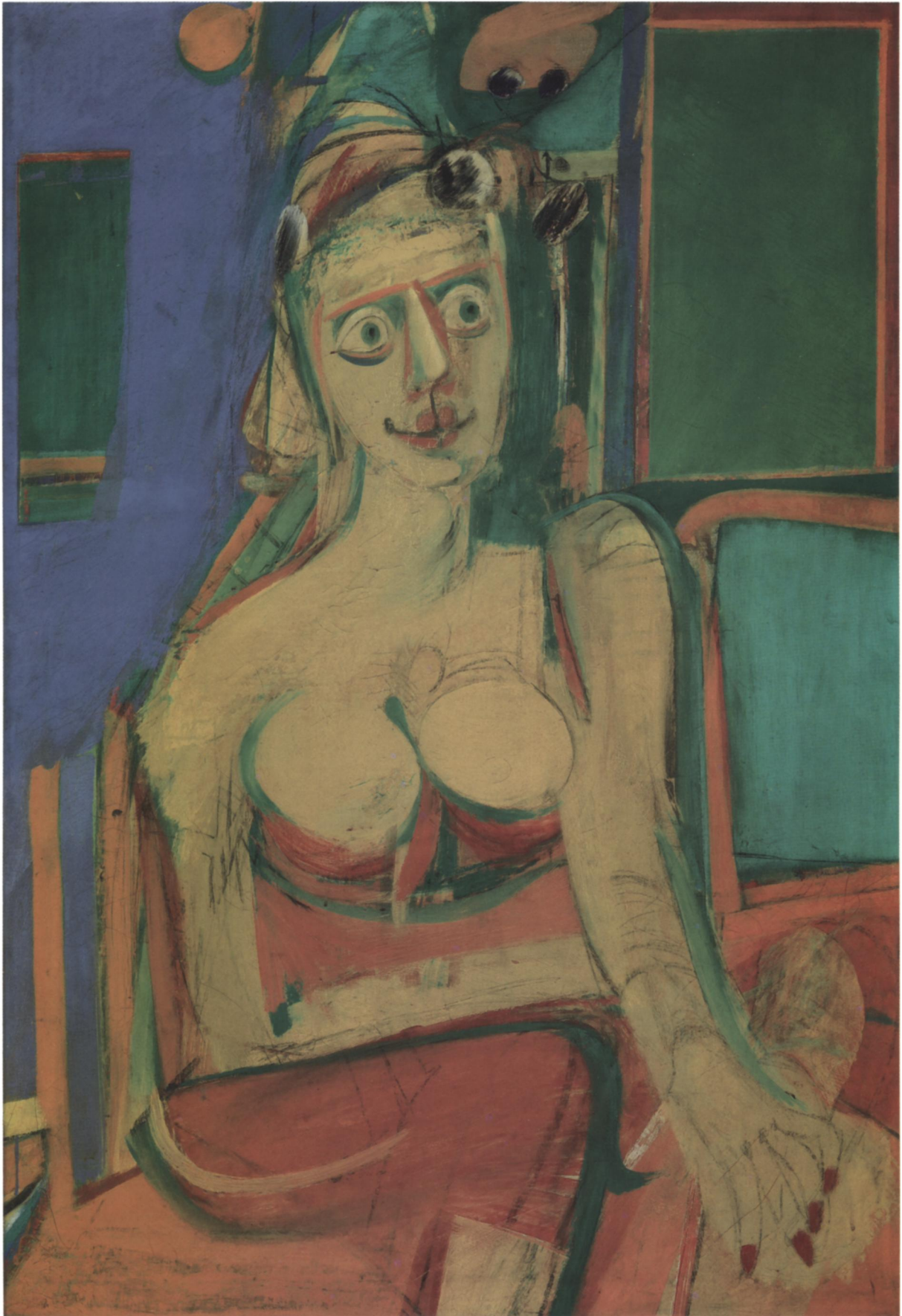
From the Collection of Thomas B. Hess, jointly  
owned by The Metropolitan Museum of Art and  
the heirs of Thomas B. Hess, 1984 (1984.613.1)

work of the next decade and the preoccupations of much of his artistic life.

*Pasiphaë*, painted by Jackson Pollock in 1943 and exhibited at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery in the following year, is the most important painting from the early period of Abstract Expressionism in the Museum's collection. Apart from its extraordinary originality—it is one of the most ambitious easel paintings by an American Modernist up to that time—it summarizes many of the concerns of Pollock and his fellow vanguardists during the transitional years of the early 1940s. *Pasiphaë* refers to classical mythology, Freudian and Jungian psychology, primitive art, European Modernism, and particularly to Picasso and Surrealism. Its dynamic, expressionist brushwork, darkling palette, and constant interplay between elements of figuration and abstraction come together to produce a brooding and tragic view of life. Here, then, in one major painting, we can pick out many of the threads that later weave in and out of the fabric of the dominant art of the next twenty years.

In 1943, the same year Pollock completed *Pasiphaë*, Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb wrote a letter to *The New York Times* (with the help of Barnett Newman) in answer to an unfavorable review by the *Times* critic E. A. Jewell. They wrote: "We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art." Ironically, at the very time that some of the artists were intent upon stressing the content and the meaning, or "truth," of their art, the leading critic and most responsive intellectual spokesman for the new painting,





Clement Greenberg, was focusing on its formal qualities, looking for the “well made picture.” Gottlieb, Rothko, and Newman, in spite of their rather grand statement, were still painting hesitant, small semi-Surrealist works that hardly announced their ambitious and confident mature styles. In 1947, in a review in *The Nation* of a Gottlieb show, Greenberg wrote:

Gottlieb is perhaps the leading exponent of a new indigenous school of symbolism which includes among others Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still and Barnett Benedict Newman. The “symbols” Gottlieb puts into his canvases have no explicit meaning but derive, supposedly, from the artist’s unconscious and speak to the same faculty in the spectator, calling up presumably, racial memories, archetypes, archaic but constant responses... I myself would question the importance this school attributes to the symbolic or “metaphysical” content of its art; there is something half-baked and revivalist, in a familiar American way, about it.

Robert Motherwell, literate in French, trained in philosophy, worldly and sophisticated, maintained intellectual contact with the Surrealist group, but at

the same time was particularly attracted to the medium of collage as explored by the Cubists a generation earlier. Like the Pollocks and de Koonings, Motherwell’s work of the mid-1940s needs no apology. It holds up well with all that he has subsequently produced, but, as of this moment, the Metropolitan has no example of this period.

What seems to have been clear at the time, and what is even more compelling from our view today, is that the artists we are considering and the small coterie of intellectuals, dealers, and critics who supported them were aware that a radical new American art was emerging, but they did not know quite how to characterize it. Dealers like Howard Putzel (who managed Peggy Guggenheim’s gallery) and Samuel Kootz organized exhibitions that attempted to define what was happening. However, most writers on art at the time were either mystified by, hostile to, or completely oblivious of the new wave. After all, the battle for acceptance of European Modernism had not yet been completely won—the audience that formed the constituency of the Museum of Modern Art was a small cultural minority, of which many members had only recently emerged from the left-wing political and literary debates of the Depression era. Although some artists shared this background, their new art was deliberately nonideological, and it is

only their total commitment to individual freedom of expression that can be characterized as a political position. Doctrinaire Marxists were as hostile to this new art, which was a private, not a “people’s” art, as were the conservative forces that sought only academic realism or Regionalism. It is difficult today, in an era of artist-celebrities, who with the slightest talent and originality achieve instant superstar status and financial success, to reconstruct the situation of the avant-garde artist at the end of the Second World War. At that time, to be “advanced” meant, by definition, to oppose established society not on a political level but in terms of cultural values and social “acceptance.” No vanguard artist sold much, and the chief audience for such a painter was other artists—together with a small contingent of intellectuals attached to the art world. It is not surprising that in such a context these artists clung together, got to know each other well, formed groups and factions, and exchanged ideas endlessly among themselves and in parochially published statements.

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17

WILLEM DE Kooning

*Seated Woman*, 1944

Oil and charcoal on canvas

46 x 36 in.; 116.8 x 81.3 cm

From the Collection of Thomas B. Hess, jointly owned by The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the heirs of Thomas B. Hess, 1984 (1984.613.2)

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With this work de Kooning began his iconic portraits of women which culminated in the savage 1953 *Woman I* (Museum of Modern Art, New York)

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By the end of the 1940s a great change in the world of the Abstract Expressionist artists had begun. The war era was receding in cultural consciousness and was being succeeded by the anxiety of the atomic age. Most of the European artists returned to Europe; so did Peggy Guggenheim, who closed her celebrated gallery, thus sending her young Americans into newly established galleries, such as those directed by Betty Parsons and Sam Kootz.

Gorky's death by his own hand in 1948 seems to mark the end of the transitional period. Indeed, in 1947 Pollock had begun to paint his pictures by laying canvas on the floor and pouring liquid paint directly from a can, often with the aid of a paint-dipped stick. In 1948, 1949, and 1950, he mounted successively more stunning shows of ever more monumental examples of this new style in the large room of Betty Parsons's 57th Street gallery. Jackson Pollock became the most discussed new artist in the United States, if not in the world.

By some mysterious action of the "spirit

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## The High Point

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18

JACKSON POLLOCK

*Number 28, 1950, 1950*

Enamel on canvas

68¼ x 105 in.; 173.4 x 266.7 cm

Promised Gift of Muriel Kallis Newman  
The MURIEL KALLIS STEINBERG NEWMAN Collection

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Like *Autumn Rhythm*, this is a major example of Pollock's style at its strongest moment. As revealed by his unconscious, we sense the whiplash energy underlying the world of matter.

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of the times," de Kooning at the same moment was developing his own version of an allover, gestural style; his somewhat more allusive abstractions contained vestiges of Gorky, Miró, and Arp in their shredded biomorphism, but were ultimately Cubist in their underlying structure. De Kooning was remarkably personal in his touch and "handwriting"—leaving drips and accidents as signs of his spontaneous action on the canvas. A historic show of some of this work, mostly painted in black and white, was held at the small Charles Egan Gallery in 1948. The public paid little attention, despite the fact that de Kooning had established an immense underground reputation in vanguard circles both for his brilliant work and his strong, witty personality. Unlike Pollock, de Kooning had attracted a host of imitators, some of whom not only painted in his style, but dressed like him and even affected a Dutch accent. By 1950 he had completed two masterpieces, *Attic* of 1949 (fig. 19)





WILLEM DE KOONING

*Attic*, 1949

Oil, enamel, and newspaper transfer on canvas

61½ x 81 in.; 157.2 x 205.7 cm

Jointly owned by The Metropolitan Museum of Art  
and Muriel Kallis Newman, in honor of her son,  
Glenn David Steinberg, 1982

The MURIEL KALLIS STEINBERG NEWMAN Collection  
(1982.16.3)

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Suggestive fragments of visual experience are here  
brilliantly displayed on an all-over grid derived  
from Cubism.

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20

WILLEM DE KOONING

*Black Untitled*, 1948

Oil and enamel on paper mounted on wood

29 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 40 $\frac{1}{4}$  in.; 75.9 x 102.2 cm

From the Collection of Thomas B. Hess, jointly  
owned by The Metropolitan Museum of Art and  
the heirs of Thomas B. Hess, 1984 (1984.613.7)

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This is one of de Kooning's early demonstrations  
that black and white could be as expressive as color.

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21

WILLIAM BAZIOTES

*Figure on a Tightrope*, 1947

Oil on canvas

36 x 42 in.; 91.4 x 106.7 cm

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Louis R. Wassermann,  
1977 (1977.471)

22

HANS HOFMANN

*The Window*, 1950

Oil on gesso-coated canvas

48 x 36½ in.; 121.3 x 91.8 cm

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger, 1951 (51.2)

and *Excavation* of 1950, his largest painting, which was purchased by the Art Institute of Chicago in that year and brought the artist his first real public recognition.

By 1950—the pivotal year that saw not only de Kooning's *Excavation* but Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm*—several other artists had reached their mature styles. Robert Motherwell, although at thirty-five the youngest of the group, had adapted his collage ideas to large-scale, flat, wall-painting motifs as in *The Voyage* (1949, Museum of Modern Art) and had executed the first sketch for an *Elegy* to the Spanish Republic (*Elegy, No. 1*, 1948, collection of the artist), which would become the dominant image in his subsequent work (figs. 32, 33). William Baziotes, whose *Figure on a Tightrope* (1947, fig. 21) demonstrates his most characteristic and poetic Surrealist-based semi-abstract, sold the larger but less satisfying *Dragon* of 1950 to the Metropolitan. Adolph Gottlieb, obsessed with primitive art, which he avidly collected, had not by 1950 emerged from the period

of his “pictographs” (fig. 11) and thus does not enter our story until the end of the decade.

Hans Hofmann's influential teaching, beginning in the thirties and continuing throughout the war years, was for Americans a point of contact with the great French tradition (he had known both Picasso and Matisse in Paris). Hofmann was also a prolific painter who in 1946 showed at Peggy Guggenheim's, later at Betty Parsons, and finally, from 1947, annually at the Kootz Gallery. Yet in 1950, he was considered more important as a teacher and elder statesman than as a painter. The 1950 *The Window* (fig. 22) in the Museum's collection is an excellent example of Hofmann's work at this time; somewhat like a demonstration of “how to make” a painting, it lacks the flowing, deeply felt inner experience he would achieve in his late style (fig. 49).







From 1947 to 1950, during the years we have been discussing, the painters who had earlier addressed that famous letter to *The New York Times*, and whose work then had in fact little relation to the ambitions the letter expressed, were now finding the plastic means to explore their spiritual and metaphysical goals. First Clyfford Still and then Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman refined and then publicly exhibited the extremely simplified, large-format, color-dominated paintings that became their signature styles for the rest of their careers.

Still, who had arrived in New York from the Northwest in 1945, mounted a one-man show at Art of This Century in 1946 that established his personal imagery, iconography, and the beginnings of his mature style, clearly linking him to Rothko and Newman in philosophical position. Indeed, Rothko wrote the introduction to the catalogue of Still's exhibition. All three artists maintained that simple, large forms were more primordial, truthful, and profound than complex configurations or images, and by 1950 all three had taken to using what, for modern painters, were very large canvases. They claimed to do this in the name not of the grandiose but of the personal. Rothko said: "I paint big to be intimate"; he wanted the viewer to be physically close to the picture (as in an apartment) and to have a sense of being surrounded by it—to have a different and more private relationship with the work than that provided by traditional easel painting.

Clyfford Still is represented here by two significant early works, a historic but small and tentative example of 1946 (fig. 24) and a larger, magnificent, mostly

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## The Metaphysicians

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black-and-white canvas of 1947 (fig. 23) that prefigures not only Still's subsequent development but also anticipates some later themes of Motherwell, Kline, and Pollock. Typically, a Clyfford Still looks somewhat like an aerial view or a contour map of a tundra, glacier, or river valley. His origins in the Northwest and his anti-European Americanism have been invoked to support this kind of landscape reading of his images. The orthodox believers, however, insist only upon Still's spiritual and metaphysical content, stressing the concept of the "sublime" (which eighteenth-century philosophers said provoked terror and awe) against an idea of "beauty," which our three artists considered to be the deceptive and decadent path taken by all Western art and against which they wished to turn their backs.

In 1961 Still finally left New York, cursing its depravity, and for years refused to exhibit or in many instances even to sell his paintings because of commercialism in the art world, thereby making collectors crave them all the more and causing his adherents to treat him as a kind of guru. While there was more than a touch of the eccentric about Still, and while his pictorial strategies surely owe something to the minor American abstractionist Augustus Tack (fig. 25), there is no denying that he created a highly original and compelling artistic statement that does, indeed, embody intimations of infinity and of the ancient elements, earth, air, fire, and water.

Rothko arrived at his distinctive style of floating shapes more slowly and was certainly helped by the examples of Still and of Barnett Newman, whose work reflected an extreme reduction of visual means. (While perhaps not expressing

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23

CLYFFORD STILL

*Untitled (1947-H)*, 1947

Oil on canvas

92¼ x 58 in.; 234.3 x 147.3 cm

Promised Gift of Muriel Kallis Newman  
The MURIEL KALLIS STEINBERG NEWMAN Collection

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Still's paintings evoke mysterious primordial  
memories and provide glimpses into an unknown  
world.

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25

AUGUSTUS TACK

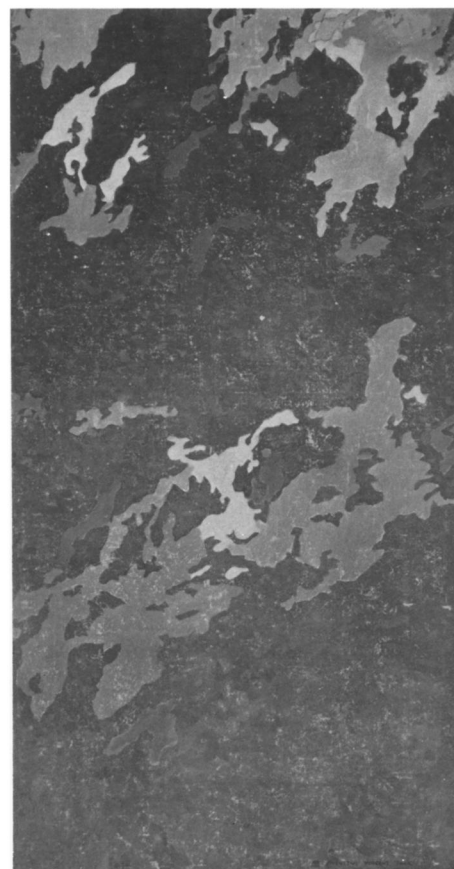
*Night Clouds and Star Dust*, 1940

Oil on canvas mounted on  
composition panel

64 x 32½ in.; 162.6 x 82.6 cm

Gift of Duncan Phillips, 1964 (64.250)

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24

CLYFFORD STILL

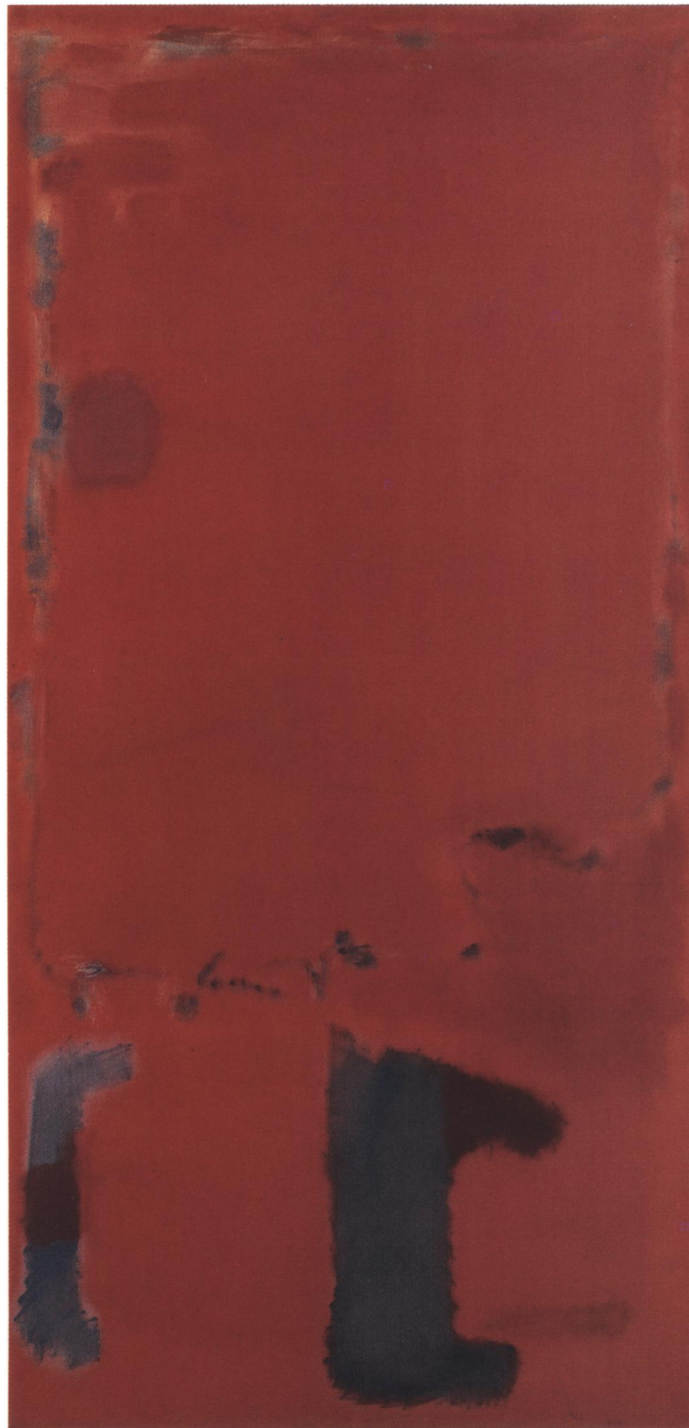
*Untitled*, 1946

Oil on canvas; 61¾ x 44½ in.; 156.8 x 113 cm

George A. Hearn Fund and Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund,  
1977 (1977.174)

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the most heroic phase of Newman's singular quest for the outer limits of the pictorial, *Concord* of 1949—fig. 29—is probably the most Rothko-like of Newman's works.) Both Newman and Rothko were deeply reflective and both published oracular statements about what art ought to be. Like Still, they were

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26

MARK ROTHKO

*Untitled*, 1949

Oil and acrylic with powdered pigments on canvas  
80 x 39 $\frac{3}{4}$  in.; 203.2 x 100 cm

Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc., 1985  
(1985.63.4)

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both very ambivalent about releasing their work into this imperfect world, and all three insisted upon complete control over placement and lighting when hanging their exhibitions. Rothko, whose typical post-1950 work was more accessible than that of Still or Newman and









28

more decoratively employable because of its format and glowing color, broke a contract to provide paintings for the Seagram Building when he discovered that the intended dining area would be public; but he eagerly embraced the idea of making paintings for a nondenominational chapel in Houston. Later, in 1968 and 1969, through the auspices of the American Federation of Arts, Rothko gave a group of paintings to the Tate Gallery in London with the proviso that they be installed together in their own room.

27

MARK ROTHKO

*Untitled (Number 13)*, 1958

Oil and acrylic with powdered pigments on canvas

95 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 81 $\frac{3}{8}$  in.; 242.2 x 206.7 cm

Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc., 1985  
(1985.63.5)

28

*Number One*, 1953

Oil on canvas

68 x 54 in.; 172.7 x 137.2 cm

Promised Gift of Muriel Kallis Newman  
The MURIEL KALLIS STEINBERG NEWMAN Collection

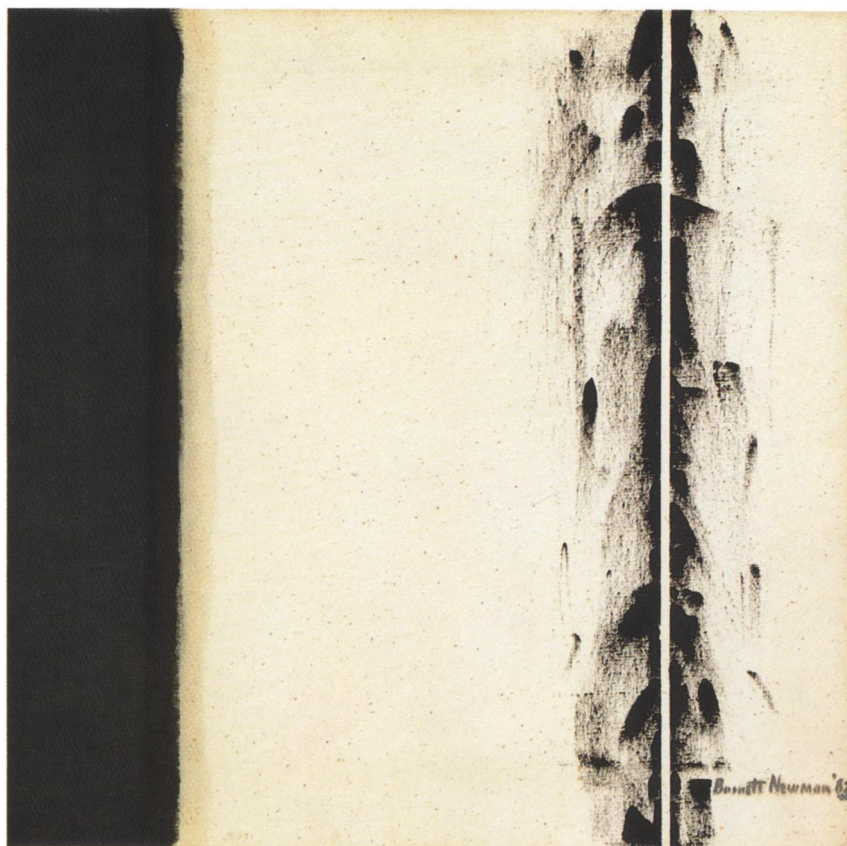
Rothko wanted his glowing, soft-edged rectangles of saturated color (figs. 9, 26–28) to provide a quasi-religious experience for the viewer, akin to some primitive altar or Stonehenge at the moment of solstice. This is not a unique desire in the history of art; art historian Robert Rosenblum has likened Rothko's auroras to effects achieved by painters in the Northern European Romantic tradition of Turner and Caspar David Friedrich. Whether, at this point, we should weep at the sublimity of it all when standing in front of a Rothko painting or whether we





Barnett Newman 1949





30

may merely enjoy it as a rich experience of Color-Field art, with just barely disquieting intimations of tragic content, should be decided by the viewer.

In Newman's case, an imposing intellectual apparatus supports work of so little pictorial incident that its claims to transcend what is visual and be judged on a higher spiritual plane require a sophisticated and responsive audience. His "zips"—vertical lines resonating in vast single-color fields—are intended to symbolize heroic gestures of humanity against the cosmic void (fig. 29). In the series of Newman's paintings entitled *Onement* (1948/49), it seems almost as if the artist likened himself, in painting his huge canvases divided by "zips," to God the Father of the Old Testament dividing the light from the darkness. In the last

29

BARNETT NEWMAN

*Concord*, 1949

Oil and masking tape on canvas

89¾ x 53¾ in.; 228 x 136.2 cm

George A. Hearn Fund, 1968 (68.178)

30

*The Station*, 1963

Oil on canvas

24 x 24¼ in.; 61 x 61.6 cm

Gift of Longview Foundation, Inc., in memory of  
Audrey Stern Hess, 1975 (1975.189.1)

years of Newman's career, he composed a series of *Stations of the Cross*, again reaching, with such a title and program, for a tragic grandeur that to some observers was not evident in the paintings themselves. A small painting in the Museum's collection, *The Station* (1963, fig. 30), is a study for this series.

Because Newman's typical work contains vast planes of undifferentiated color, suppressing the sense of touch or other aspects of expressionist painterliness, his reputation suffered a slow start during the heroic Abstract Expressionist years of the early 1950s. Since then, however, it has been growing, and it is supported by a loyal following of collectors and curators who, among themselves, contemplate and share the intensity of his vision.







The climactic year of 1950, then, encompassed not only Pollock's great poured paintings such as *Autumn Rhythm* and *No. 28, 1950* (fig. 18) and de Kooning's *Excavation* but Newman's first public showing of his wall-size color fields and Rothko's realization of his definitive large format. 1950 also saw an elegant show at Betty Parsons by the gentlemanly post-Cubist Bradley Walker Tomlin (see fig. 34 for a slightly later example) and witnessed the dramatic debut of a totally new artistic voice, Franz Kline, whose first one-man show of all-black-and-white dramatic, gestural paintings created a small sensation in the art world. *Nijinsky* (fig. 31), from the collection of Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman, was in that historic show at the Egan Gallery, where de Kooning's work had earlier been exhibited.

In 1948 both Pollock and de Kooning had separately experimented with the expressive possibilities of limiting their color to black and white. Now Kline,

## Black and White

31

FRANZ KLINE

*Nijinsky*, 1950

Enamel on canvas

46¼ x 35½ in.; 117.5 x 90.2 cm

Promised Gift of Muriel Kallis Newman  
The MURIEL KALLIS STEINBERG NEWMAN Collection

32

ROBERT MOTHERWELL

*Elegy to the Spanish Republic*, 70, 1961

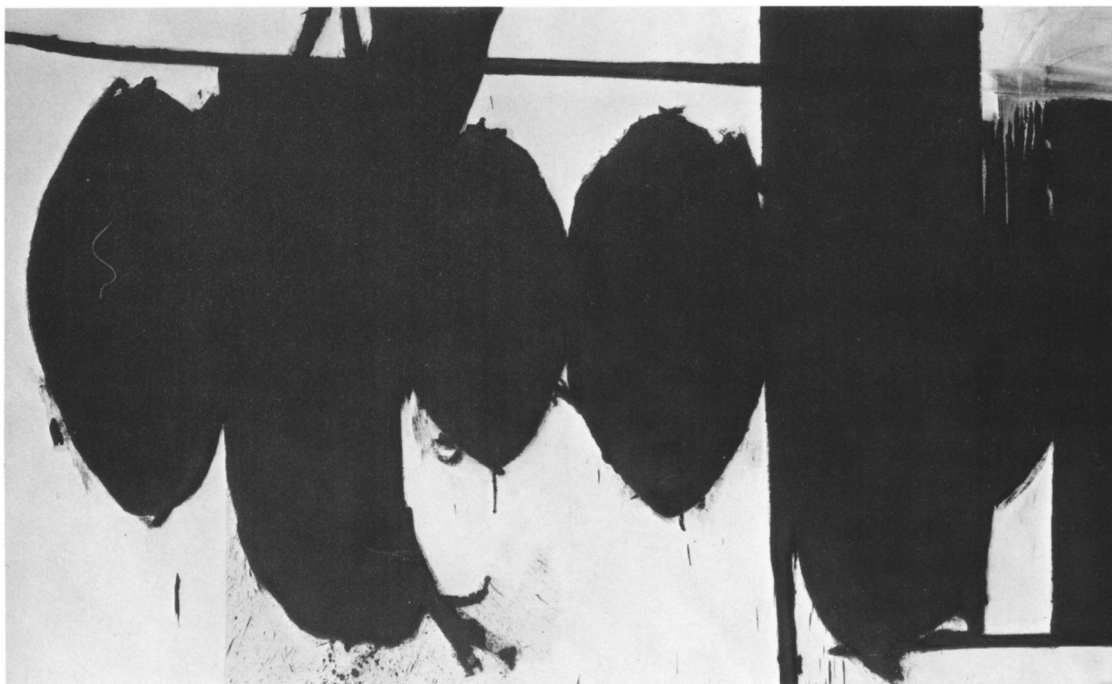
Oil on canvas

69 x 114 in.; 175.3 x 289.6 cm

Anonymous Gift, 1965 (65.247)

drawing heavily on de Kooning but strongly original as well, made the black-and-white clash of forces, the calligraphic gesture, and the Zen-like brushstroke into a hallmark of Abstract Expressionist painting. In 1950 the Kootz Gallery mounted an exhibition entitled *Black on White: Paintings by European and American Artists*, and in 1951 Jackson Pollock devoted his whole exhibition at Betty Parsons to large, drawinglike paintings in black Duco on raw, unprimed white canvas; no longer entirely abstract, these Rorschach-like, allusive works showed, as Pollock himself put it, "some of my old images coming through." This new technique (which Pollock continued to use into 1952), of allowing the paint to stain and thus to fuse with the surface of the canvas (fig. 35), proved very influential on the next generation of American painters.

For Motherwell, too, the strategy of using black and white for dramatic and emotional effect had become a dominant theme. From his long series of paintings called *Elegy to the Spanish Republic*, the Metropolitan possesses *Number 70*,





ROBERT MOTHERWELL

*Elegy to the Spanish Republic, 35, 1954*

Magna on canvas

80 x 100¼ in.; 203.2 x 254.6 cm

Promised Gift of Muriel Kallis Newman

The MURIEL KALLIS STEINBERG NEWMAN Collection

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*Elegy 35* is one of the most powerful versions of a theme that had preoccupied the artist since 1948.

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34

BRADLEY WALKER TOMLIN

*Number 11, 1952-53*

Oil on canvas

59 1/8 in.; 150.2 x 266.1 cm

Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, 1953 (53.92)

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dating from 1961 (fig. 32), and will receive *Number 35*, executed in 1954 (fig. 33), from the collection of Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman. Begun, as we have noted, in 1948, the series culminated thirty years later in the enormous *Reconciliation Elegy* of 1978, commissioned by the National Gallery of Art, Washington. Inevitably, Motherwell's repetition of this rhetorical image under changing historic conditions has produced uneven results, and something of the early emotive power of the Elegies perhaps has diminished, so that they tend now to satisfy as monumental decoration in the best sense of the word. Indeed, while Motherwell's career is characterized by an intelligent and

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35

JACKSON POLLOCK

*Number 7*, 1952, 1952

Enamel on canvas

53½ x 40 in.; 134.9 x 101.6 cm

Anonymous Loan

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Here Pollock demonstrated the effect of paint staining and penetrating unsize canvas—a technique that influenced an important group of younger artists in the late 1950s.

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sophisticated mind solving formal pictorial problems with style and panache, his published statements of intention show that he too sees his art as carrying a tragic and epic weight. While the Abstract Expressionists as a group have overwhelmingly proved that abstract art can serve as a vehicle for the revelation of the unconscious, and therefore be a means to communicate artistic content of urgency to humanity, such meaning cannot be forced and must remain unspecific, untranslatable into words. Thus Pollock, easily the most intense of the group, gave numbers instead of titles to most of his "classic" pictures (as did Rothko) and in so doing avoided the glosses and misunderstandings of titles too programmatic and descriptively explicit.









The fourteen artists on the Metropolitan's list continued to produce major work through the 1950s, further developing the strong personal styles they had achieved. As they gained wider public acceptance, the kinds of pressures such success brings caused most of those who showed at Betty Parsons to leave, moving across the hall of the same 57th Street building to the more commercially successful gallery of Sidney Janis, where Picasso, Braque, Léger, Mondrian, and others were regularly shown as "Modern Masters." Janis represented Pollock, Rothko, de Kooning, and Kline, along with the Gorky estate, while Motherwell, Gottlieb, Baziotes, and Hofmann showed at the Kootz Gallery. Newman, whose work seemed not to suit the taste of those years, and Clyfford Still withdrew from exhibiting and cultivated their recondite images in seclusion.

After Pollock's two black-and-white shows of 1951 and 1952, which were marked by a partial return to figuration, de Kooning exploded a bombshell with his show of Women paintings at Janis in 1953. Here, using his wide housepainter's brush, his full repertoire of slashing, inner-directed gestural strokes, and a range of bright acid colors, including a shocking flesh tone, de Kooning stunned his abstractionist-oriented colleagues and critics with a quite legible group of frontal, savage female goddesses. The Metropolitan's collection, while exceptionally rich in his work, does not contain one of these monumental modern icons, but I illustrate an excellent mixed media on paper (fig. 37) of this period to provide

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## Fame

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some idea of his concept. De Kooning had, of course, prepared the path to this series in his figurative work of the middle and later 1940s (fig. 17). By 1955 he would adapt the complex, painterly, expressionist execution of the Women series to a new, again largely abstract, subject matter based loosely on themes evoking the dynamism of urban life. *Gotham News* (Albright-Knox Art Gallery) and *Easter Monday*, both of 1955-56 (which, you will remember, the Metropolitan had wisely purchased while the paint was still wet), are the two masterworks of this moment in de Kooning's career. *Easter Monday* is the latest significant piece by de Kooning in the Museum's collection at this time, even though today, thirty years later, he is still actively painting.

In the summer of 1956, Jackson Pollock died in the now famous automobile crash that took the life of one of two young women who were with him. This dramatic event became the substance of myth, like the story of van Gogh's ear and Modigliani's suicide, first through the emotional reaction in the art world at the loss of an acknowledged genius and a legendary, troubled personality, and later through the popular channels of the modern press and magazine world. By means of such Sunday-supplement, soap-opera exploitation, the fame of Pollock and, by extension, his fellow painters entered the consciousness of the general public. While Pollock's death certified his fame and, coincidentally, seems to have influenced the commercial value of Abstract Expressionist art, it also signaled the end of the period when, for the purposes of art history, these painters might be considered together as a group.

A second generation of younger artists

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36

WILLEM DE KOONING

*Easter Monday*, 1955-56

Oil and newspaper transfer on canvas

96 x 74 in.; 243.8 x 187.9 cm

Rogers Fund, 1956 (56.205.2)

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The kind of slashing brushwork seen in this painting caused the term "action painting" to be applied to the whole Abstract Expressionist movement.

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—the so-called Tenth Street painters—had meanwhile come forward, producing variations on the work of their elders, especially de Kooning. And by the beginning of the 1960s, in what seems a paradigm of cultural dialectics, a brilliant group of newer artists were creating work that specifically rejected Abstract Expressionism, reacting against or consciously parodying it. The wide public acceptance of the Abstract Expressionist masters, following a struggle that began in the Great Depression and culminated in the years just after the Second World War, marked the demise of the vanguard

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37  
 WILLEM DE KOONING  
*Two Women*, 1952  
 Oil, enamel, and charcoal on paper  
 21 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 30 in.; 55.6 x 76.2 cm  
 Promised Gift of Muriel Kallis Newman  
 The MURIEL KALLIS STEINBERG NEWMAN Collection

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artist operating in opposition to bourgeois culture and its institutions. Since then, a more commercial and success-oriented “star system,” which need not be described here, has developed in the art world. Nevertheless, the long shadows of Pollock, Kline, and Rothko, and the living examples of de Kooning and Motherwell loom large and are still widely revered, even in the frantic streets of New York’s Soho.



After Pollock's death, the dominance of the artists we have been discussing became a world-wide phenomenon. The Museum of Modern Art, whose already scheduled exhibition devoted to Pollock in mid-career (planned for 1956/57) was to turn into a memorial show, began to give increasing attention to the historic development that had taken place in its own backyard and quite without its help. (Tchelitchev's *Hide and Seek* was then MoMA's most popular painting, and most of its trustees preferred late Surrealists and "Magic Realists" among the newer artists). In 1958/59 MoMA sent to eight European cities the landmark exhibition *The New American Painting*, which securely established the Abstract Expressionists as the best and most interesting artists working at that moment in the Western world. Curiously, it was this survey—organized by Dorothy Miller to be sent abroad—that established our group of artists as an identifiable movement; and their reception in Europe encouraged an unaccustomed art-market success at home.

Until his untimely death in 1962, Franz Kline continued to develop and extend his vocabulary of strong black-and-white images. The Metropolitan's large *Black, White, and Gray* of 1959 is one of the best of his late pictures (in some he returned to using color), but, inevitably, in pursuing such limited visual means a certain posturing and mannerism crept in. Kline is better represented by the early *Nijinsky* and *Untitled* (1952, fig. 39), both masterworks of crispness and clarity and both collected by Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman.

In 1950 Philip Guston, a high-school

## Epilogue

friend of Pollock's who had earlier achieved fame as a semi-realist painter of public murals, was working in friendly proximity to the other Abstract Expressionists when he rethought his whole aesthetic. He emerged almost instantaneously with a poetic, Monet-like series of canvases marked by tender crisscrossing strokes, the whole point of which seemed to be a celebration of brushwork (fig. 41). Later in the decade, Guston softened and flattened his brushstrokes, and in the resultant patterns (fig. 42) one begins to discern hints of mysterious subject matter that would soon be fully revealed. Thus, very much in character, Guston, who had radically changed his way of painting in the early 1950s, changed again in the 1960s, to cartoonlike figurative subjects, full of sarcasm, social comment, and grim humor (fig. 43). He painted these curious images with the hesitant, soft brushwork of his last abstract style, producing a series of slightly campy, self-consciously "bad" paintings, not unrelated to the late work of Giorgio de Chirico, which together with Guston's has been a strong influence on recent developments in Postmodern art.

Among the other members of a group of artists now dead, drifting apart, or pursuing separate, individual careers was Adolph Gottlieb. In the 1940s he was, along with Rothko and Newman, one of the would-be metaphysicians, and he continued until 1952 to work in a pictographic style (fig. 11) based on his yearnings for what I see as a self-conscious sort of primitivism. Finally, in 1959, Gottlieb found his characteristic image—a sunlike disk above a Pollock-like scumble, both set against a white background. He called these handsome paintings, which constituted a reduction

38

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB

*Cool Note*, 1965

Oil on canvas

48 x 36 in.; 121.9 x 91.4 cm

Gift of Longview Foundation, Inc., in memory of  
Audrey Stern Hess, 1975 (1975.189.4)







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39

FRANZ KLINE

*Untitled*, 1952

Oil on canvas

53 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 67 $\frac{1}{2}$  in.; 135.6 x 171.5 cm

Promised Gift of Muriel Kallis Newman  
The MURIEL KALLIS STEINBERG NEWMAN Collection

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and distillation of his earlier pictographs, Bursts, and he continued them, with variations, until his death in 1974 (figs. 6, 38).

The Metropolitan owns several other examples of the later work of some of these artists whose careers extended into the 1960s and 70s. In 1969 the Museum was given a group of large paintings by Robert Motherwell, all painted in 1968: *Number 19*, *Number 35*, and *Number 37* (fig. 44) of a series he called Open. Here the artist seems to be responding to other developments around him in the art world at that time (Minimalism, Conceptual art, and Color-Field painting) as well as to distant echoes of Matisse, to produce works that demonstrate the minimal means necessary to constitute a painting. While both sensitive and cerebral, these are not among Motherwell's most compelling works, and he soon largely returned to his early pictorial formulas, especially to the making of collages, which were more congenial to his nature.

Another notable gift was offered to the Metropolitan from the estate of Hans Hofmann—the bulk of the so-called Renate series of 1965, in which the octogenarian artist, at the height of his powers in extreme old age (as had been Matisse and Monet, for example), celebrated his joy in his recent marriage to his much younger second wife (see fig. 49 for one of the most brilliant examples of this series). Curiously, Hofmann, whose work counted only slightly in the vintage years of the Abstract Expressionist movement, painted what are probably the most successful paintings of its epilogue years—a kind of coda to the whole enterprise by the oldest participant, who personally constituted a link to the European tradition.

Lee Krasner, Hofmann's student in the




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40  
 JACK TWORKOV  
*Adagio*, 1953  
 Oil on canvas  
 80 x 28 in.; 198 x 71.1 cm  
 Anonymous Gift, 1955 (55.82)

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1930s and Pollock's widow since 1956, created her strongest work after her husband's sudden death, partly in reaction to it, and her pictorial intelligence directed her to produce exemplary late Abstract Expressionist canvases and collages until her own death in 1984. The Museum's *Rising Green* of 1972 (fig. 46) is somewhat hard-edged and Matisse-like, but with Krasner's centrifugal swing of forms.

The Metropolitan's collection also encompasses characteristic works by James Brooks, Jack Tworikov, and Ad Reinhardt (figs. 45, 40, 47), who were serious and creditable artists situated on the edges of the main current. Richard Pousette-Dart, who also participated in the events of the 1940s and early 50s, is represented in the Metropolitan by a recently acquired large painting of 1975 (fig. 48), in which he has moved very far from the truly Abstract Expressionist vein of his early work.

After 1956 the Abstract Expressionist phase of American painting comes to an end slowly, "not with a bang, but a whimper." From the vantage point of 1987 we look back at the movement's critical years from a distance of four decades—exactly the same span from which, at the moment of their most crucial activity, the artists under consideration could look back to Fauvism and Cubism, the heroic period of the early twentieth century. They could see at the time, as we still can, the supremacy of Picasso and Matisse as great creator-inventors of pictorial Modernism, and they understood the important contributions of Braque, Léger, and Gris as Cubists; Mondrian and Kandinsky were already the two poles of abstraction.





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41

PHILIP GUSTON

*Painting*, 1952

Oil on canvas

48 x 51 in.; 121.9 x 129.5 cm

Promised Gift of Muriel Kallis Newman  
The MURIEL KALLIS STEINBERG NEWMAN Collection

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42

PHILIP GUSTON

*Close-up III*, 1961

Oil on canvas

70 x 72 in.; 177.8 x 182.9 cm

Gift of Lee V. Eastman, 1972 (1972.281)

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43

*The Street*, 1977

Oil on canvas

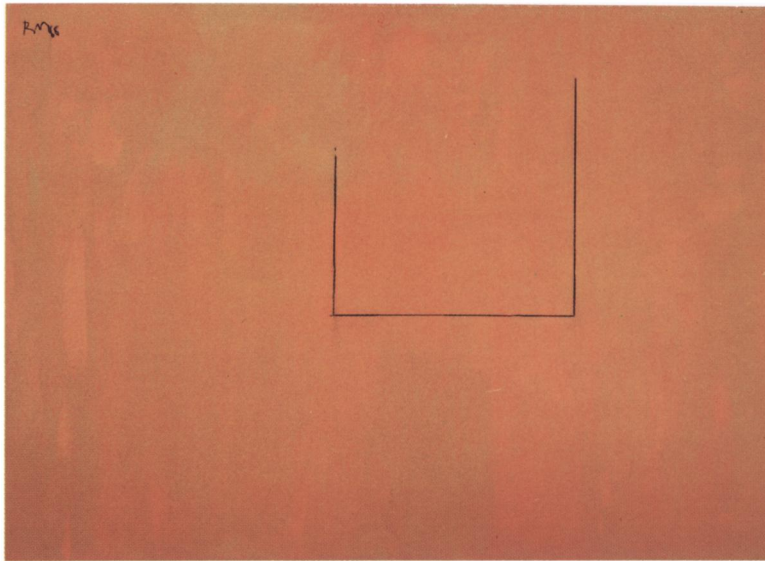
69 x 110¾ in.; 175.3 x 281.3 cm

Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace and  
Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Saul Gifts, Gift of  
George A. Hearn, by exchange, and  
Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, 1983  
(1983.457)

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During the years of their rise to dominance and then to historic status, the artists we have been discussing engendered an immense literature in the form of individual monographs and general critical and historical surveys. Most of this literature has been partisan, much of it even political, at least within the context of the art world, and it borders in certain extreme cases on hagiography. It has sometimes been too obedient to the often extravagant statements by the artists themselves about the grandeur of their aims and their achievements. In surroundings such as The Metropolitan Museum of Art, with its masterpieces of human creation from the Egyptians to the present, one must try to put even such

a rich and productive decade as 1945–55 into a long-term perspective. While nothing can diminish the undoubted achievements of all these artists and their enrichments of our ways of seeing, only Pollock and de Kooning would seem today to stand—and only with their best work—in the very first rank of twentieth-century artists. And as Pollock died in crisis in mid-career and de Kooning, while still active, has made less powerful statements since 1956, the careers of

neither can quite match the extended, multifaceted developments of the greatest pioneer Modernists, Cézanne or Monet for instance, or of the best early twentieth-century masters, Picasso and Matisse. Nevertheless, by such elevated comparisons we are able to see how very high some of these American Abstract Expressionists did indeed reach. While historical distance will continue to help us to evaluate their work more objectively, their strong representation in the new Lila Acheson Wallace Wing of the Metropolitan Museum will help us to place them clearly and proudly within the great tradition of world art.

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44

ROBERT MOTHERWELL

*Open Number 37*, 1968

Polymer paint and charcoal on canvas

88 x 122 in.; 223.5 x 309.9 cm

Anonymous Gift, 1969 (69.277.3)

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45

JAMES BROOKS

*Ainlee*, 1957

Oil on canvas

84 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 66 $\frac{1}{4}$  in.; 215.6 x 168 cm

George A. Hearn Fund, 1957 (57.48)

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46

LEE KRASNER

*Rising Green*, 1972

Oil on canvas; 82 x 69 in.; 208.3 x 175.3 cm

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Victor Thaw, 1983  
(1983.202)

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47

AD REINHARDT

*Red Painting*, 1952

Oil on canvas; 78 x 144 in.; 198.1 x 365.8 cm

Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, 1968 (68.85)

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48

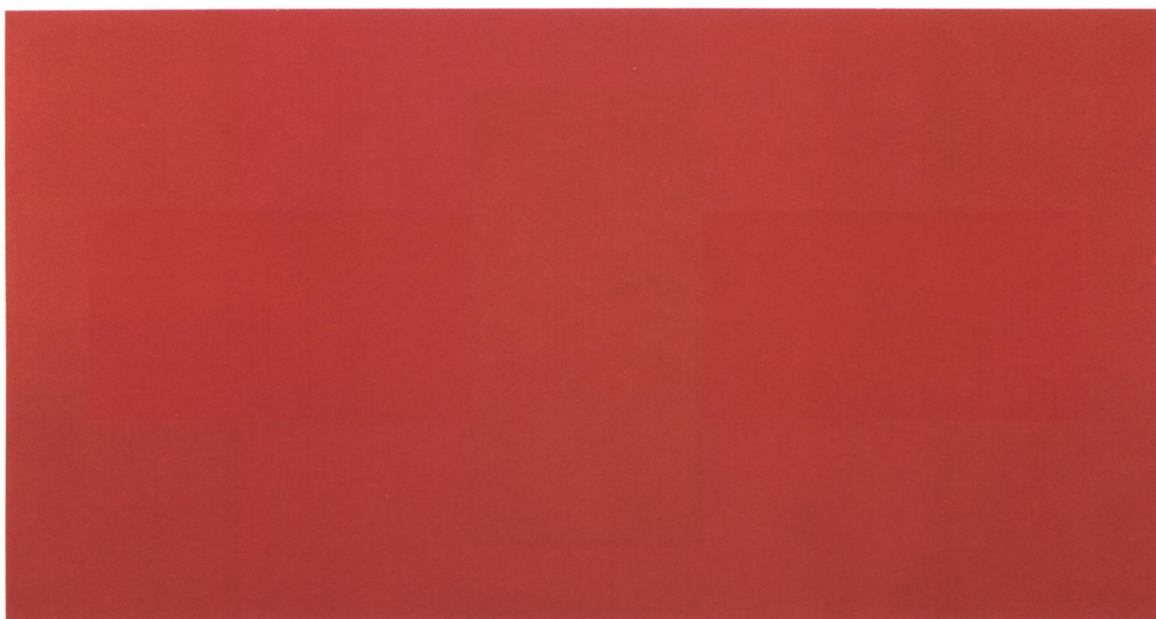
RICHARD POUSETTE-DART

*Presence, Ramapo Horizon*, 1975

Acrylic on canvas; 72 x 120 in.; 182.9 x 304.8 cm

George A. Hearn Fund, 1982 (1982.68)

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49

HANS HOFMANN

*Rhapsody*, 1965

Oil on canvas; 84¼ x 60½ in.; 214 x 153.7 cm

Gift of Renate Hofmann, 1975 (1975.323)

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A late Abstract Expressionist masterwork by the oldest artist of the group, *Rhapsody* was painted shortly before Hofmann's death at age eighty-six.

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*Photograph credits*

Lynton Gardiner, figs. 26, 27, 40, 44, 45, 47, 49; Schechter Lee, figs. 7, 9, 30;  
Metropolitan Museum of Art Photograph Studio, figs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16,  
17, 18, 20, 23, 25, 29, 32, 33, 35, 37, 38, 42, 43, 46, 48, 49; Alan B. Newman, Chicago, figs. 28, 31,  
39, 41; Malcom Varon, covers, figs. 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 19, 21, 22, 24, 34, 36.

*On the covers*

Detail of *Easter Monday* (fig. 36), by Willem de Kooning



