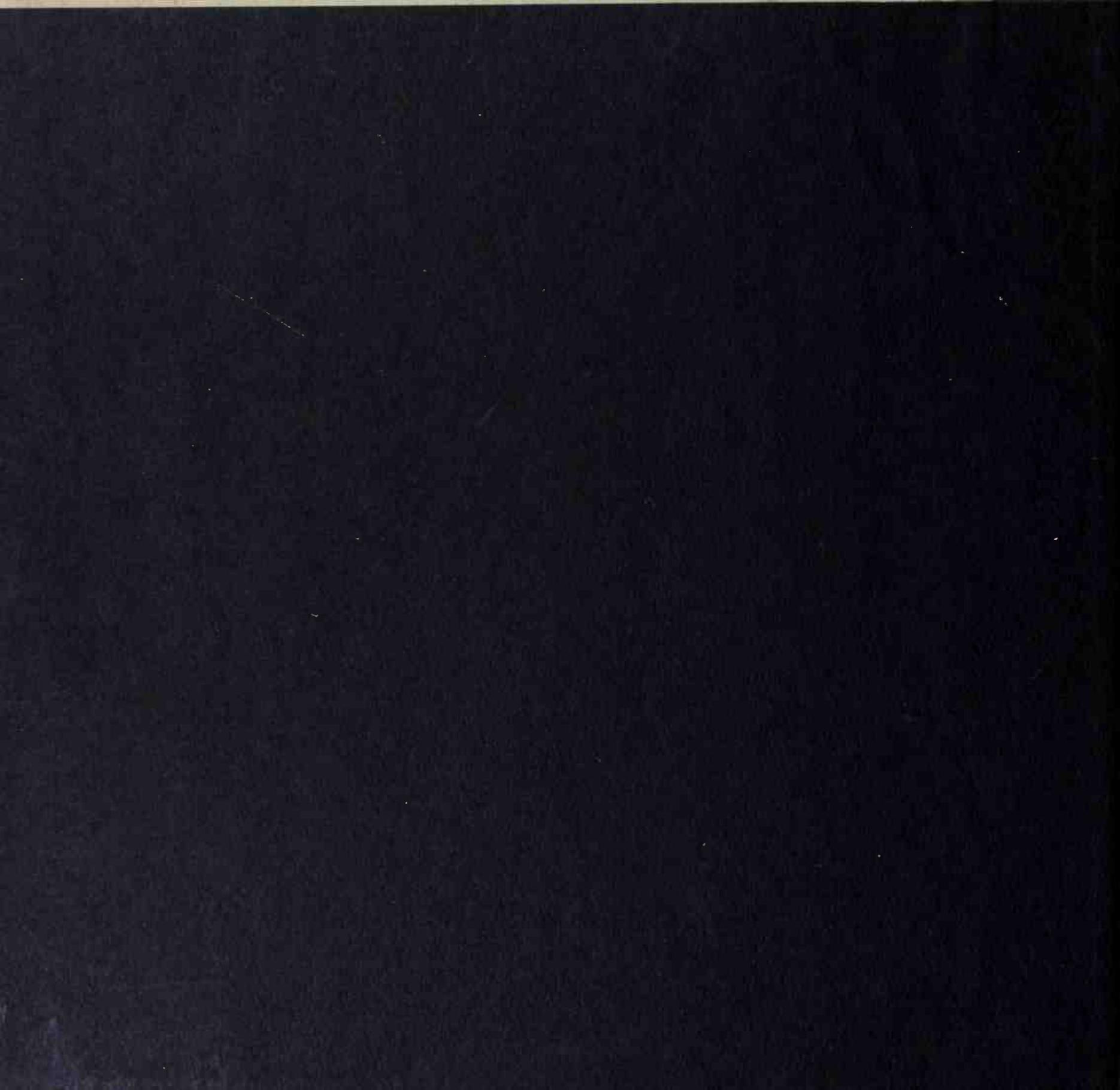


VOLUME
10

AMERICA REDEFINED
THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK









THE MEANINGS OF MODERN ART

by JOHN RUSSELL

Art Critic, The New York Times

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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK



I. Thomas Eakins

Max Schmitt in a Single Scull, 1871

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Max Schmitt was a schoolmate of Eakins who grew up to be a champion sculler. Oarsmanship was much in the news at the time when Eakins painted this

picture, and he set himself to paint something that would be a portrait of an identifiable human being and yet have in it (as we can see from his sketches) something of precision engineering.

Between 1945 and 1970 there was acted out in New York City a considerable human adventure: the emergence after nearly three hundred years of an independent, self-generating and specifically American art.

Why *then*, and not before? Why *there*, and not somewhere else? These questions deserve an answer. For there had of course been art in America before, and some of it had been very good. But it had stood in the shadow of European art. Such independence as it had was owed sometimes to its American subject matter, sometimes to the American turn of mind which lay behind it, sometimes to the irresistible complicity which links a painter to his public. There had also, as we have seen, been instances in America from 1913 onward of an art which could be called "new." But these were phenomena without progeny; the artists in question did not, for one reason or another, produce that continuing body of distinctly new work which was the mark of the great Europeans. Sometimes they died young, sometimes they turned conservative, sometimes they gave up hope, sometimes they went so far as to destroy their earlier and more experimental work.

It is for these reasons that American painting remained until 1945 in what might be called a colonial situation. It was dominated, in other words, by the art of other times and older places. Thomas Eakins was a first-rate human being, but something in his art came to him at second hand—from Rembrandt, in the case of *The Gross Clinic* (fig. 1), from Gustave Courbet, from Thomas Couture. Eakins was probity personified; there are paintings by him which stand out as landmarks in the history of American self-awareness; nothing in his work is fudged or faked. But if we put an Eakins on the wall beside a great Courbet it ends by looking limited, local, and in the noblest sense provincial. We have to remind ourselves that for an American painter to come so far in the 1870s and '80s was already a prodigious achievement.

Yet America had already a literature of the kind, and of the stature, which stamps and defines a great nation at a crucial stage in its development. In the France of the 1850s Edgar Allan Poe was one of the most influential of all English-speaking writers; and a nation which had produced, in that same decade, Melville's *Moby Dick*, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Thoreau's *Walden*, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Emerson's *Representative Men* and Motley's *The Rise of the Dutch Republic* did not have to bother about being called "provincial." Every one of these books was unmistakably and irreducibly American; and so firmly did Melville, Whitman and Hawthorne probe the sensitive places of American awareness that they can be said to have usurped the prerogatives, and to a real degree the idiom, of art. Clement

Greenberg pointed this out as long ago as 1944 when he said that *chiaroscuro*, or the instinctive play of light against dark, was fundamental to *Moby Dick*, where "blackness and night are the dominants of the first chapters; the narrator stumbles through pitch darkness to find a Negro prayer meeting being held behind the first door from which a ray of light emerges; this prepares us at a long remove for the contrast of the evil whiteness of the whale."

It would have been difficult, in any case, for American painters to rival the epical assurance with which both Whitman and Melville addressed themselves to an expanding America. The language of painting was not in the American grain by instinct, as was the language of literature. It had to be learned, and learned in relation to alien examples from alien lands. It was all very well for Ralph Waldo Emerson to say to a Harvard audience in 1837 that "our day of dependence draws to a close. . . . We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. . . . We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds." The American poet, novelist, philosopher, statesman or jurist did not need to look overseas; in his domain, and in the American life style as a whole, there was already a tradition to be proud of. If the American painter looked around him with an equivalent ambition he saw only what had been done better in Rome, in Venice, in Paris, in Düsseldorf, in Munich, even in London. It was a discouraging state of affairs; and there was no short cut to its transformation.

The only thing to do was what the best American painters kept doing instinctively: plug away at the alliance of European styling with American subject matter until one day there would exist a native tradition with enough momentum to lift off onto a completely different level of achievement. In particular the steadfast contemplation of everyday fact might one day yield impressive results. Emerson defined this admirable and enduring American trait when he said at Thoreau's funeral in 1862 that "every property of matter is a school for the understanding—its solidity or resistance, its inertia, its extension, its figure, its divisibility. The understanding adds, divides, combines, measures, finds nutriment and room for activity in this worthy sense." It was this side of Thoreau—what Emerson called his "natural skill for mensuration"—which makes him so outstanding as an observer of Nature; and I owe to the art historian Barbara Novak the insight that this same skill underlies many of the finest of American 19th-century paintings. We could say of George Caleb Bingham in his Mississippi river scenes (fig. 2), of Winslow Homer in his *Dad's Coming* (fig. 3), and of Eakins in his minutely planned and re-planned studies of sculling (fig. 5), what Emerson said of Thoreau,



1. Thomas Eakins
The Gross Clinic, 1875
Jefferson Medical College
of Philadelphia

The Gross Clinic is one of the noblest pictures ever painted by an American. Though clearly based on Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson*, it is specifically of the American 19th century in its determination to get at the truth, no matter how awkwardly. Medical studies were not for the squeamish, as we can judge from the attitude of the man in the foreground on the left; and art was not for the squeamish either. It demanded the same degree of dedication and that same insensibility to ridicule which distinguished the great pioneers in other disciplines. Anatomy was as fundamental to art in Eakins's day as it was to medicine: whence the gravity with which he recorded the attitudes of those who, like himself, were looking for the truth at no matter what cost to themselves.

that "his power of observation seemed to indicate additional senses. He saw as with microscope, heard as with ear trumpet, and his memory was a photographic register of all that he saw and heard."

Implicit in all this was not only a care for exact statement but a determination to tell the truth. American painters had not the fluency of their contemporaries in France or England or Germany, but their very awkwardness makes us the more confident of what they have to tell us. When Henry James was writing regularly about new painting in the 1870s his idea of a good "modern" subject was something that reeked of the picturesque: local life in Capri or Tangier, for instance. For this reason he despised Winslow Homer for what he called his "blankness of fancy": his trust, in other words, in the meticulous measurement of the local



2. George Caleb Bingham
Raftsmen Playing Cards, 1847
The St. Louis Art Museum

Anecdotal painting of a specifically 19th-century kind is here given something of the classic dignity and solidity with which Louis Le Nain had painted French peasant life two hundred years earlier (Volume 1).



3. Winslow Homer
Dad's Coming, 1873
Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, Washington, D.C.



4. William Sidney Mount
Cider Making, 1840–41
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



6. Winslow Homer
The Nooning, 1872(?)
 Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Conn.



5. Thomas Eakins
Perspective Drawing for John Biglen in a Single Scull, c. 1873–74
 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Eakins in his studies of scullers made it look the most natural thing in the world—as in plate I—to catch them as they paused upon the glassy water. But an American tradition of exact measurement lay behind that painting, and is exemplified in preliminary drawings such as this one.

scene. We can almost hear James grind his teeth as he lists Homer's subject matter: "his barren plank fences, his glaring, bald, blue skies, his big, dreary, vacant lots of meadows, his freckled, straight-haired Yankee urchins, his flat-breasted maidens, suggestive of a dish of rural doughnuts and pie, his calico sun-bonnets, his flannel shirts, his cowhide boots." But mensuration wins out: it would be hard to find anything painted in Capri or Tangier that is fit to hang in the same room as Homer's *The Nooning* (fig. 6). A provinciality that is accepted and lived through for what it is will turn out from time to time to have a dignity all its own. Listening to Dutch music, grappling with the Norwegian novel, sitting in the main square of a market town in the Balkans, we become aware of this. But American 19th-century painting does not come across to us as an art that is resigned to never getting any nearer to the mainstream. It has the quality of an art that one day will get, from the society which surrounds it, a charge so strong as to be almost without precedent. An imaginative American just *knew*, in the 1870s and '80s, that time was on his side. Eakins had been to Paris in the 1860s, and no American painter ever put the city to better use; but he told his students, all the same, that "if America is to produce great painters, and if young



7. Anonymous
Meditation by the Sea, c. 1850–60
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



8. Winslow Homer
Snap the Whip, 1872
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



9. Eastman Johnson
The Hatch Family, 1871
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

art students wish to assume a place in the history of art in their country, their first desire should be to remain in America, to peer deeper into the heart of American life."

And American life really did reward those artists who put their trust in it. This was particularly true of American landscape, and of the plain-spoken character of American country life. But there was still a European overlay to most 19th-century accounts of the American experience. Sometimes the artists had actually been born in Europe, like Albert Bierstadt. Often they went to Europe for a mandatory period of study and assimilation. Even if—like Fitz Hugh Lane—they had never left the United States there were still echoes, somewhere in back, of a European achievement. We cannot look at Lane's paintings of the sea coast of New England without thinking of Dutch marine painting, any more than we can look at an Asher Brown Durand without thinking of Claude Lorrain, or at the giddy panoramas of Frederick Edwin Church without thinking of how J. M. W. Turner had tackled the immensities of the Alps. Even the anonymous painter of the *Meditation by the Sea* (fig. 7) has a German ancestor in Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840). What gives such paintings their singular beauty is precisely the tension between these borrowed idioms and their specifically American subject matter. Henry James thought that Winslow Homer had taken "the least pictorial features of the least pictorial range of scenery and civilization"; but the vigor of Homer's *Snap the Whip* (fig. 8) comes as much from the careful plotting of horizontals and diagonals—an echo, most probably, of Old Master painting—as from the linked energies of the nine little boys as they pull this way and that.

Toward the end of the 19th century, two things combined to disturb the equilibrium between Europe and America which had been achieved, however approximately, by the painters I have named. One was that the new European influences were of quite another kind; the other, that New York became what it has remained ever since—the effective capital of American creativity. These two factors in combination brought about the loss of the crystalline, hymnlike character which had been common to nearly all the artists so far illustrated here; they also meant that metropolitan imagery made its appearance, for the first time, in American art.

THE METROPOLITAN IMAGE

Sometimes this metropolitan imagery prompted an art of record: one which preserved the look of things in a specific place at a specific time. Eastman Johnson's New York interiors of the late 1860s and early '70s are examples of this (fig. 9). Johnson was as good a craftsman, in his way, as Léon Marcotte, the French



10. Thomas Anshutz
Steelworkers—Noontime, c. 1880–82
Private collection

decorator and cabinetmaker who was much in demand in New York at that time, and when he was commissioned to portray one of Marcotte's interiors the two men played ideally into each other's hands. But in such paintings the role of the artist did not really differ in kind from the role of the valet who saw to it that the master of the house had a clean shirt every day; these tightly packed pictures are fundamentally menial in their function.

New York had nothing of the exalted teaching tradition which had been initiated in Philadelphia by Eakins and was continued from 1877 onward by his successor, Thomas Pollock Anshutz. It was with Anshutz that there entered into American painting something that had never been there before: the completely realized perception of metropolitan life. In a painting like his *Steelworkers—Noontime* (first exhibited in 1883; fig. 10) the principle of mensuration still applies; it was certainly not of Anshutz that William Morris Hunt was thinking when he wrote in his influential *Talks on Art* that "people think it isn't smart to measure, and take pains. Well, let such draw fine things—if they can." We can see from *Steelworkers—Noontime* that Anshutz took enormous pains: measuring, plotting the fall of light, testing his long diagonal, balancing light against dark, making sure that the rutted tracks in the narrow street echoed the line of his roofs. Care of this order had been taken by William Sidney Mount, for one, in



11. John Sloan
Renganeschi's Saturday Night, 1912
The Art Institute of Chicago

John Sloan had learned from the French Impressionists not only to handle paint with a new freedom and a new freshness but to give an easy-going vivacity to scenes from daily life. His days as an "artist reporter" had also taught Sloan to catch our fancy with an incisive, all but caricatural attention to human quirks and oddities.

the 1840s. But whereas Mount quite consciously dealt in an unspoiled Arcadia which found a ready market among moneyed metropolitans, Anshutz annexed for art the new conditions of industrial society. Earlier even than Georges Seurat in Paris, he brought an echo of the ancient world to the day-to-day life of the factory worker. He was Eakins' assistant when he painted this picture, and it has something of Eakins' own moral grandeur.

Anshutz spent all his life in Philadelphia; but as his pupils there included Robert Henri, George Luks, William Glackens and John Sloan, he can be said to have formed at least four artists who went on to become prominent New Yorkers. New York lacked, as I said earlier, a teaching tradition; and it also lacked the tradition of patronage that had fostered the development of European painting. (Louis Palma di Cesnola, director of The Metropolitan Museum from 1879 to 1904, said categorically that New York artists were just not good enough for the Metropolitan.) To buy



12. Robert Henri
The Masquerade Dress: Portrait of Mrs. Robert Henri, 1911
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

In paintings such as this one, an echo of the standing figures of Edouard Manet was made to chime with the homegrown pleasures of dressing up.

work by a New York artist was a faintly second-rate thing to do. Nor did New York have what Paris and London had had for generations: an officialdom which doled out the big commissions and dominated the taste of the well-to-do.

For this reason there was no settled Establishment to which an ambitious artist might hope to graduate. If you wanted to live like John Singer Sargent you had to go and do it where Sargent himself did it: in Europe. In New York there was journeyman art, and there was Bohemia, and there was nothing much in between: the artist was not a professional man. This could be very galling; but it made for an open, unstuffy, precarious way of life which turned out in the end to be favorable to art.

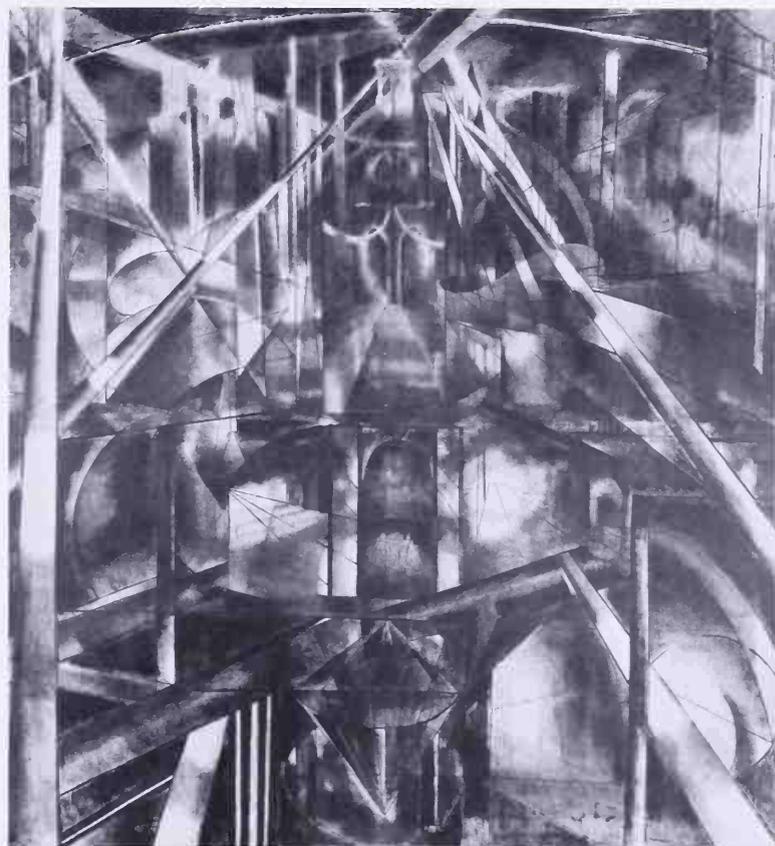
It also de-mystified the act of painting. It is difficult in the United States of America to make a mystique of something that has neither social status nor academic status and doesn't make any money. When Anshutz's pupils got out into the world it



13. Jacob A. Riis
*Baxter Street Alley, Rag
 Picker's Row*
 (photograph)
 Museum of the City of
 New York

seemed to them quite natural that the only demand for their work was from newspaper editors. (At one time Sloan, Luks, Glackens and Everett Shinn were all "artist-reporters" on the *Philadelphia Press*; and when Mark Tobey was growing up to be an artist he dreamed of being able to put the American girl of 1910 on canvas with the assured skill of Charles Dana Gibson.) In time, and because photography could do the job faster and more cheaply, the newspaper editors dropped out of the market for young artists. Thereafter, the climate of New York art life was established: painting was an activity like any other, to be carried on in circumstances no matter how discouraging and in the knowledge that almost nobody would be interested.

There are, of course, as many New Yorks as there are New Yorkers. New York is a self-devouring, self-renewing city, with which we come to terms as best we can. It is one of the supreme subjects of our century: one for which we would wish Balzac, Dickens and Proust to have been born again. New York is never the same for ten days together. Every novel about it is a historical novel before it gets to the printer. The movies do better: but even there we notice a landmark lately torn down, a turn of speech now obsolete, an ethnic frontier since readjusted. Where literal evocation was concerned, art lost out to photography: Robert Henri and John Sloan tried hard to get the real rough life of everyday into their paintings, but even so they had to yield to the photographs of Jacob A. Riis when it came to the facts of immigration (fig. 13), just as their successors had to yield to



14. (above) Joseph Stella
Brooklyn Bridge, 1919-20
 Yale University Art
 Gallery, New Haven,
 Conn.



15. John Marin
Street Crossing, New York,
 1928
 The Phillips Collection,
 Washington, D.C.

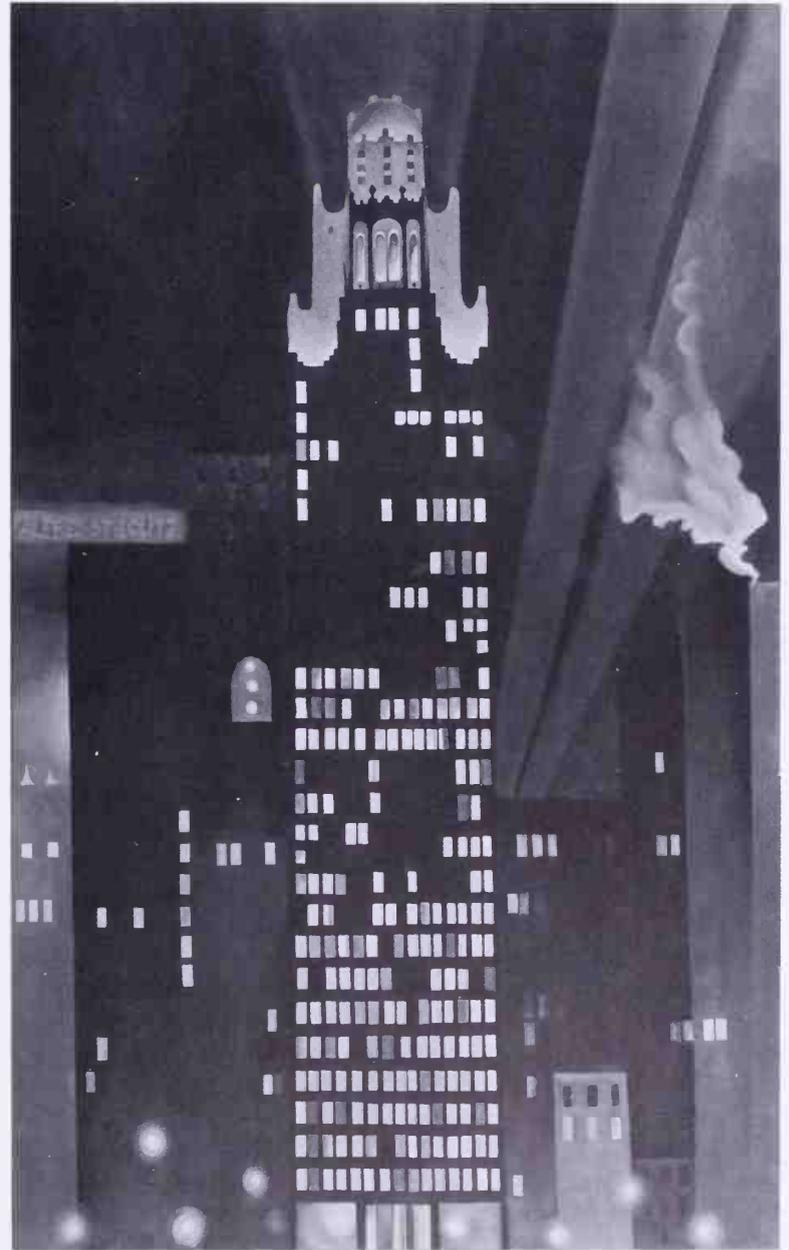


II. Georgia O'Keeffe
Black Iris, 1926
The Metropolitan Museum
of Art, New York



16. Georgia O'Keeffe
New York—Night, 1928–29
 Nebraska Art Association,
 Lincoln

Walker Evans and to Paul Strand when it came to the facts of a later age. To paint "the American scene" came to be regarded as almost a national duty; but where New York was concerned it now seems that a literal transcription was never enough, and that some kind of poetic ellipsis, some transfusion of high style, was indispensable. It is certain at any rate, that when New York was painted by Joseph Stella in 1919–20 (fig. 14), by John Marin in 1928 (fig. 15), by Georgia O'Keeffe in 1928–29 (fig. 16), and Mark Tobey in 1936 (fig. 18), over and over again, it took on a timeless and a most paradoxical look. Tobey's *Broadway* is Broadway today, even if most of the buildings he painted have come down. The plunging view adumbrated by John Marin still holds true. We know just where we are with the O'Keeffe. And although the Brooklyn Bridge is no longer the phenomenon that it was in Stella's day, it is vividly present to us in his big painting.



17. Georgia O'Keeffe
Radiator Building—Night, New York, 1927
 Fisk University, Nashville, Tenn.



18. Mark Tobey
Broadway, 1936
 The Metropolitan
 Museum of Art,
 New York

Mark Tobey is best known for all but incorporeal abstract paintings to which a mystical interpretation has often been given. But in *Broadway* he called upon the gift for ribald observation which he had perfected as a young artist-reporter for the newspapers. The perpetual motion of Tobey's line vibrates with the energies of a great city; but embedded within it are incidents of a down-to-earth kind.

These artists had nothing in common with one another but a refusal to fall back into illustration. There was much to illustrate in the America of the 1920s and '30s, and there were good painters who saw it as their duty to illustrate it; but of a specifically modernist approach to painting there was very little. In the mid-1920s the conditions for modernism were wretched, by the standards of today: no Museum of Modern Art, almost no dealers for modern art, almost no collectors, almost nowhere to publish and almost nothing to read. Modernism was thought of as un-American: a word at first used in mockery but later, from the mid-1930s onward, to have a more sinister inflection. The critic Harold Rosenberg remembers the exhibitions of the 1930s: "without an awareness," he says, "of that endless mass of mill runs, fields with scarecrows, white barns and distant windmills, railroad tracks, crowded evening streets, housewives undressed to the waist staring earnestly into the spectator's eyes, marble mother-and-child themes in cubistically simplified forms, it is impossible either to apprehend the burdensomeness of American painting and sculp-

ture in those days or, what is much more important, to appreciate the desperate creative force that it took to break into new ground in the years that followed."

American art was at that time the poor relation of American literature. When Alfred Kazin published *On Native Grounds* in 1942 he could say without fear of ridicule that "the emergence of our modern American literature" was regarded as "the world's eighth wonder, a proof that America had at last 'come of age.'" If that now reads like a message of reassurance to an America newly at war, there is still a very great difference in range, in power, in depth of understanding and in agility of formal invention between even the best American painting in the 1920s and '30s and the novels of William Faulkner, the best stories of Ernest Hemingway and the poems of Marianne Moore.

But then major art does not come out of nothing, or out of the unsupported will to create. It comes out of tradition, and out of knowledge, and out of a developed understanding of just where art stands at the time in question. When T. S. Eliot published *The Waste Land* in 1922 it was neither a fluke nor a flash in the pan; Eliot had prepared himself as a poet, and as a man, in the only way that makes fine work possible. Already in September, 1914, when Eliot was 26, Ezra Pound wrote of him that "he is the only American I know of who has made what I can call adequate preparation for writing. He has actually trained himself and modernized himself *on his own*. It is such a comfort to meet a man and not have to tell him to wash his face, wipe his feet, and remember the date (1914) on the calendar."

Ezra Pound had many faults; but he knew what it was to be modern, and he knew how peculiarly difficult it was to be modern in America. At that time the question "What does it mean to be an American?" still called for an answer in terms of the known and the safe. "All right," he wrote to a young editor in 1932, "you want a *style* out of America. Stick at it. But when it comes it mayn't be where you are looking for it."

For a painter to "modernize himself," as Pound put it, he needs to know what is strongest in modern art. This means not so much seeing the work once—as it was seen for instance at the Armory Show in 1913—as having it to hand day after day, week after week, year after year. It also means talking about it with like-minded people: ideally, with those who made it. The impact of the Armory Show was enormous, as we have seen; but it was an impact that died away. What New York needed was the climate of the new: and eventually, toward the end of the 1920s, New York began to get it.

It began quietly. Katherine Dreier and Marcel Duchamp had been introducing Miró and Klee, Kandinsky and Max Ernst and

Mondrian, in the exhibitions which were held at 475 Fifth Avenue under the aegis of the Société Anonyme. A dealer called J. B. Neumann opened on Fifty-seventh Street in 1924; specializing in German Expressionism, he wrote above the gallery door, "To love art truly means to improve life." Something of this moralizing tack, this tendency toward uplift in its most exalted form, was to characterize the new American painting. Miró, Mondrian and Lissitzky had a place of honor in an international exhibition which was put on in 1926 at the Brooklyn Museum. From 1927 onward the collection of A. E. Gallatin was on view in the library of New York University, within walking distance of the section of the city which was most in favor with artists. To have work by Cézanne, Braque, Picasso, Mondrian, van Doesburg and others continuously on view was a long stride toward de-provincialization. In 1929 The Museum of Modern Art was opened, and Alfred H. Barr and his colleagues began to assemble a pioneer collection which has never been equalled. In 1936 the resources of abstract painting in New York were strengthened by the arrival of the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, which was particularly rich in Kandinsky and later formed the nucleus of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

This may sound like an orderly progress toward enlightenment; but in fact it was nothing of the kind. Modernism is not something that can be learned step by step, like bookkeeping. To come to terms with it means a many-years' struggle, in which faction is pitted against faction and the very basis of the enterprise is subject to calumny and recrimination. There were decent American artists in the 1920s and '30s who thought that modernism was a waste of time. Others associated it with the materialism of great cities and felt that the only salvation for Americans lay in what was the original strength of America: its vast and still largely uncorrupted landscape. There were also intelligent observers, like the Austrian-born architect and visionary Frederick Kiesler, who thought that Americans should concentrate on what we would now call mixed-media art, leaving the old, hand-crafted, individualistic tradition to Europe. "The expression of America is the mass," Kiesler wrote in 1930, "and the expression of the mass, the machine." Throughout the years of the stock market crash, the Depression and the New Deal these ideas were thrown back and forth like hand grenades; and the context in which they were thrown was one not of detached aesthetic enquiry but of an awesome self-questioning: can America survive?

AN EMERGENT AMERICA

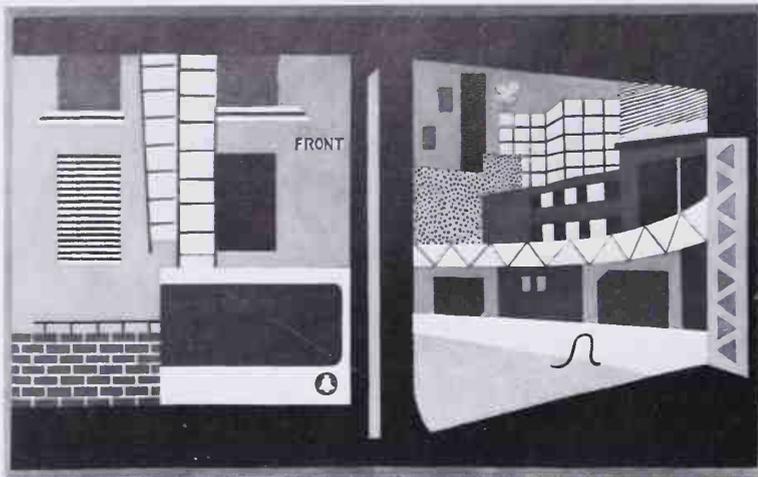
To piece this together after nearly half a century is the historian's privilege. Actually to live through it was something quite



19. Gerald Murphy
Razor, 1922
Dallas Museum of Fine Arts

Gerald Murphy had a very small output as a painter, and he was known to his friends primarily for the discerning and hospitable way of life which he and his wife, Sara, devised for themselves in France in the 1920s. (Echoes of that life reverberate throughout F. Scott Fitzgerald's elegiac novel *Tender Is the Night*.) But it turned out that Murphy had learned from his friend Fernand Léger to give common objects, as here, a new monumentality.

different; and, as in athletics, those who were out front at the beginning were not always out front at the end. Among those who figured in the first American Abstract Artists exhibition in 1937 there were many whose personalities, as artists, were already at their point of maximum development. The men who were going to produce the new American art in the late 1940s were at an earlier phase in their evolution. The vital thing at that moment was for them to keep open, as individual human beings, and to settle for nothing less than the conviction that American art would one day do America a most signal service. After what seems in retrospect to have been a long and very dull patch in the 1920s, there were a few people around who were prepared to give unequivocal expression to that point of view. In 1937, for instance, the Russian-born artist and aesthetician John Graham



20. Stuart Davis
House and Street, 1931
 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Stuart Davis cut the descriptive element in painting to essentials that could be reduced no further; and then he put them together again in ways that owed much to French mentors but were also quintessentially American in their throwaway wit. For an example of this, see how deftly Davis here epitomizes contrasting styles of architecture.



said of Stuart Davis, Arshile Gorky, David Smith and Willem de Kooning that "some are just as good as, and some are better than, the leading artists of the same generation in Europe." It was a lot to say at the time, but luckily it was true; for the future role of American art was nothing less than to redefine America.

There could be no more lofty ambition. It is given to few men to bring to their own countrymen a new degree of national self-awareness. This was the role of Shakespeare in England, of Pushkin in Russia, of Giuseppe Verdi in Italy, and of Nietzsche, for better or worse, in Germany. "Now I know who I am!" was the reaction of their first audiences; and it is still the reaction of their audiences today. It is the highest function of art to tell us who we are. That function is difficult to fulfill at any time and in any society; but in a society which takes it for granted that its artists are not only second-rate but at the highest level superfluous it is more difficult than ever.

If American art overcame this handicap by the late 1940s some part of the credit must go to an administration which made American artists feel, for the first time, that they were part of a society which cared whether they were alive or dead. In 1935 the Roosevelt administration initiated a scheme by which, at a time of the direst national distress, thousands of artists came to receive a regular monthly subsidy from the government. Thanks to the WPA (Works Progress Administration) and to its director in matters of art, Holger Cahill, American art was freed from the depressive posture which had kept its line of sight so unduly low. As to what kind of art should come of it all, the dispute was as lively as ever; but something of moral apathy had been abolished.

Looking back at the 1930s and early '40s, we may well regard them as a time at which everything was going right, taking a long-term view, for American art. Matisse in the 1920s and Léger in the '30s had both forecast a great future for American art if Americans would only realize their full potential. And when wave after wave of gifted refugees began to arrive from Europe, American

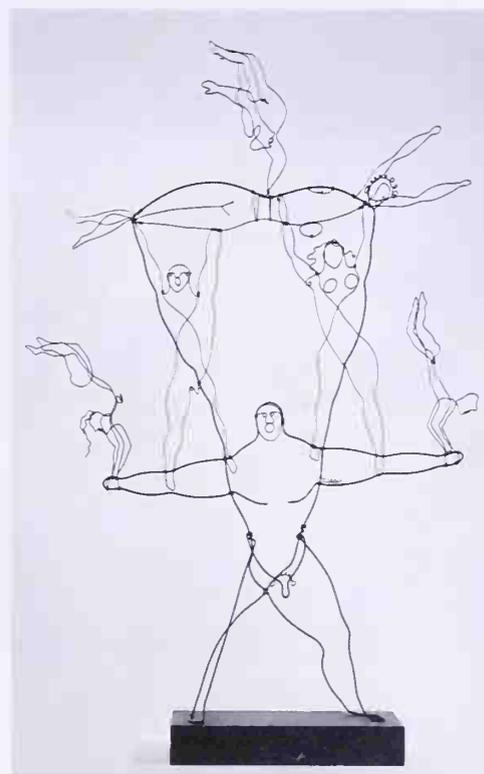
21. (left) Edward Hopper
House by the Railroad, 1925
 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

When it comes to the distillation of those sensations of loneliness and disinheritance which play so large a part in American life, Edward Hopper has no equal. He is ahead of the novel, ahead of the movies, ahead even of Eugene O'Neill. Give him a deserted gas station, a half-empty cinema, or the terrace of a townhouse lit by the declining sun, and he will sum up a certain idea of America.

art had its full share of the reinvigoration which ensued. "Reinvigoration" is not, in this context, a mere formal compliment. Europe had nothing better to offer than Albert Einstein among physicists, Thomas Mann and Vladimir Nabokov among novelists, Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg among composers, and Mies van der Rohe and Marcel Breuer among architects. All these had their peers in art, and an astonishingly high proportion of them came to the United States at some point between 1933 and 1942. The American poet John Peale Bishop once said that it was given to the United States at that time to prolong the past of Europe into the future; and nowhere was this more true than in art.

Not everyone came, of course. Matisse said "What will become of France if all the talented people leave?" Nor did it occur to Picasso to take the boat. But they were present in New York as the most vivid of influences: Matisse's *Bathers by a River* (Volume 6) hung for years in the entrance to the Valentine Gallery, and the new American art batted especially on Picasso's *Girl before a Mirror* of 1932 which was given to The Museum of Modern Art in 1938. Léger in the 1930s visited New York more than once, before he arrived as an exile in 1940. Hans Hofmann opened a painting school in New York in 1936; and to many a thoughtful observer he was continuity personified. Here was a man who had been in touch with all that was best in European art since he had first gone to Munich in 1898. He had drawn alongside Matisse at the Grande Chaumière, most famous of the old-fashioned free art schools in Paris. He had known Picasso, Braque and Delaunay before 1914. In Munich during World War I he had stored many paintings by Kandinsky in his studio after Kandinsky himself had left for Russia. In his teaching, and later in his work, he looked forward to a fulfilled future in which Cubist structure and Fauvist color would somehow be allied to the rhapsodic outpourings which Kandinsky had brought to perfection in his Improvisations. In life, Hofmann was a very large man with a commanding manner; by the mid-1930s, 20 and more years as a teacher had reinforced his inborn powers of persuasion; artists and critics alike were deeply impressed when he got to his feet. What he had to offer then was not a set of predetermined lectures. It was a day-to-day account of his attempt to remake himself as a painter, in the light of all that he had known and seen and thought about; for the previous 15 years he had virtually abolished painting, in the belief that until he had found out how to "sweat out cubism" he had best stick to drawing.

Hofmann approached the problems of painting with an immediate physicality which was very attractive to his audiences in New York. The group known as the American Abstract Artists



22. Alexander Calder
The Brass Family, 1929
Whitney Museum of
American Art, New York

Like Degas, like Toulouse-Lautrec, like Seurat and like Fernand Léger, Alexander Calder as a young man was fascinated by the circus: so much so, in fact, that he built a working model of a circus, complete in every detail, which is now in the Whitney Museum. Calder's one-man performance as the master and manipulator of this circus was famous for the energy, the fun and the unflagging invention which he brought to what in other hands could have been labored and overlong. The experience taught him to draw in the air, as here, with an epigrammatic concision.

inclined toward a geometrical abstraction in which every straight line was trued and faired and the color was applied with a fastidious thinness; the results often looked, if not starched, then freshly laundered. Hofmann introduced an element of bodily involvement in which painting became "an affair of prodding and pushing, scoring and marking, rather than of simply inscribing and covering." Those words come from Clement Greenberg's essay of 1961 on Hofmann; and Greenberg is doubtless correct in citing Soutine—above all, Soutine's Céret landscapes—as the source of this element in Hofmann's teaching. Insofar as any one man could set up the conditions for the new American painting,



23. Hans Hofmann
Landscape, 1936
 Courtesy André Emmerich Gallery, New York



that man was Hans Hofmann. He was the complete cosmopolitan; but whereas the cosmopolitan has often more knowledge than drive, Hofmann had in the highest possible degree the German's will to win; and he passed it on to others.

Early in 1939 Picasso's *Guernica* arrived in New York; it was with the outbreak of World War II, and more especially with the fall of France in the summer of 1940, that New York began to harbor not only the masterpieces of modern European art but quite a few of the men who had made them. The men in question included Piet Mondrian, Fernand Léger, Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy, László Moholy-Nagy, André Masson and the Chilean-born Sebastian Matta Echaurren. André Breton was there to assure the continuity of a certain idea of Surrealism, and Peggy Guggenheim was there to open, in 1942, a gallery called Art of This Century. In World War II, as in World War I, the European avant-garde was in and out of New York all the time.

Somewhere in the mid-1940s the notion of a specifically American modern art began to be discussed, and what history calls the First New York School came into being. The name is un-historical, in more ways than one. There was no one school, in the sense of a teaching institution, in the sense of an orthodoxy or shared body of beliefs, or in the sense of a group of artists who showed together, like the French Impressionists. There was not even the kind of unified activity which the word generally implies. The artists were as unlike one another, as human beings, as it is possible for artists to be. Yet the words "First New York School" stand for men who do undeniably belong together; Jackson Pollock, Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, David Smith, Hans Hofmann, Franz Kline, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Adolph Gottlieb, Philip Guston, Clyfford Still. It is thanks to them that feelings of wonder and acceptance took the place of the defeatism which had been so widespread among the public for American art in the 1920s and '30s.

24. (left) Chaim Soutine
The Old Mill, c. 1922
 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

In the landscapes which Soutine painted in Céret, in southern France, there is foreshadowed one of the chief characteristics of the First New York School: an intense nervous energy which communicated itself to the movement of the brush. Soutine painted what looks to us like a world in convulsion; but the convulsion in question was in his own fingers' ends, and in the rapid and purposeful to and fro of the brush. As much as in anything painted by Jackson Pollock, the canvas becomes what Harold Rosenberg in 1952 called "an arena in which to act, rather than a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyze or 'express' an object, actual or imagined."

These feelings were generated by men who were not young, at the critical moment, as Picasso and Braque were young when they broke through to Cubism. To one degree or another they had all taken a battering from life. Beyond that, what was there in common between Arshile Gorky, who was born in Turkish Armenia of a family of village tradesmen, and Clyfford Still, who was born in North Dakota of Scottish and Irish ancestry? Gorky learned the European masters by heart, the way an aspirant actor learns "To be or not to be"; Still thought of the Armory Show as "that ultimate in irony" which "had dumped upon us the combined and sterile conclusions of Western European decadence." There were close friendships among the artists concerned—Pollock and Guston, de Kooning and Gorky, Rothko and Gottlieb—but there were also divergences of experience and of origins, which were so extreme as to exclude anything more than a wry and intermittent admiration.

For instance, Willem de Kooning was born in Rotterdam, Holland, and he was going on 22 when he got into the United States with false papers at the third time of trying. He did not have, therefore, the sense of an American-ness within him that cried out for redefining. "It is a certain burden, this American-ness," he said in 1963. "If you come from a small nation, you don't have that. When I went to the Academy in Rotterdam and I was drawing from the nude, I was making the drawing, not Holland." In the 1930s and early '40s very dull things were done in the name of American-ness. ("Art in America today," Barnett Newman wrote in 1942, "stands at a point where anything that cannot fit into the American Scene label is doomed to be completely ignored"; de Kooning spoke of "making art out of John Brown's body." Just about the only artist who used specifically and unmistakably American subject matter without falling into an isolationist aesthetic was Stuart Davis (fig. 20), who loved France and French art and yet never reneged on his wiry, sinewy, plain-spoken nature. It was Davis, as much as anyone, who de-provincialized American painting. This was acknowledged already in 1931 by Arshile Gorky, then 26 years old, when he paid tribute to Davis as "this man, this American, this pioneer, this modest painter, who never disarranges his age, who works to perfect his motives, who renders—clear, more definite, more and more decided—new forms and new objects." The phrase that matters here is that Davis "never disarranges his age"; the art and the age were one, in his work, and a painting like his *Lucky Strike* of 1921 (Volume 6) has about it not only an after-echo of Fernand Léger but a specifically American form of plain statement.

To those who wondered if American painters would ever manage to modernize themselves in Ezra Pound's sense, Stuart Davis



25. Ben Shahn
Welders, 1943
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Ben Shahn was concerned, all his life, with the dignity of the disadvantaged. Injustice, poverty and inequality outraged him; and he put that outrage across in his art in ways that made him a most effective crusader. During World War II he was able, as here, to give a dimension of grandeur to tasks which in themselves were anything but glamorous.

brought reassurance. But it was not enough for one man and one picture, here and there, to have exceptional status. What was dreamed of in the 1930s, and what found all too little in the way to support it, was a state of affairs like the one described by Harold Rosenberg in an article first published in 1940. Inspired by the entry of the German armies into Paris, it began with the sentence: "The laboratory of the 20th century has been shut down." Rosenberg went on to look back to the period immediately before 1914, when "suddenly, almost in the span of a single generation, everything buried underground was brought to the surface. The perspective of the immediate was established—or rather, a multiple perspective, in which time no longer reared up like a gravestone or flourished like a tree but threw up a shower of wonders at the will of the onlooker."

NEW YORK IN THE 1940s

That was exactly what people were beginning to ask of New York in the 1940s: a shower of wonders, in which everything buried underground was brought to the surface and a perspective of the immediate was established. This could not be one man's doing, any more than what happened in Paris before 1914



26. Arshile Gorky
The Artist and His Mother, 1926–29
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

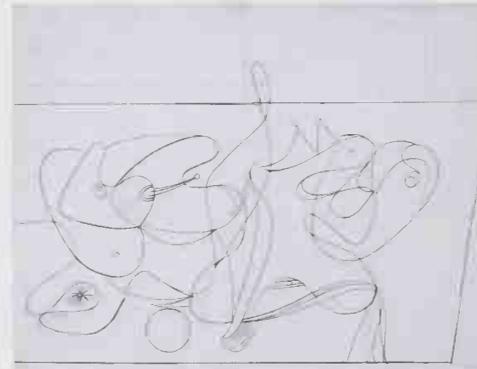
The young Arshile Gorky arrived in America with a sense of uncompleted identity. He was a member of a disregarded minority. He was poor, he had nowhere to go, he had no evident gifts. He could not even speak English. But within four years of deciding to become a painter he produced this monumental canvas, and the message of it is: "We too are substantial human beings."

was one man's doing. Picasso and Matisse, Braque and Delaunay, Bonnard and Mondrian, late Cézanne and continuing Monet—all had contributed to Paris at that time, sometimes in the closest collaboration but most often with no interconnections whatever. Frenchmen like Braque played their part; but so did new arrivals from abroad, like Juan Gris and Constantin Brancusi, and visitors



27. Arshile Gorky
Staten Island, 1927–28
Mr. and Mrs. Hans
Burkhardt, Los Angeles

Staten Island has never looked so French as in this dexterous adaptation of Cézanne, which is proof of the earnestness with which the young Gorky set about mastering the European tradition.



28. Arshile Gorky
*Study for Nighttime,
Enigma and Nostalgia*,
c. 1931–32
The Museum of Modern
Art, New York

By the early 1930s Gorky had mastered the ambiguous, hybrid forms which had been developed by the European Surrealists; and he was able, as here, to produce images of entanglement which had human overtones and yet did not allow of a literal interpretation.

who stayed only a season, like Kandinsky. A bit of everything, in human terms, and all of it good: that was the idea.

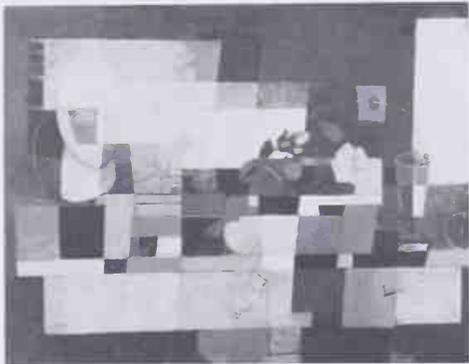
And New York in the 1940s carried it through. Even more than St. Petersburg before 1917, or Paris in the 1920s, New York is the completely cosmopolitan city: the place in which no one need feel a complete outsider or despair of finding someone of his own race, color, tastes and beliefs with whom to strike up acquaintance. New York has something of Athens, something of Shanghai, something of Odessa, something of Dublin, something of Tel Aviv. It's all there: there is no tune that cannot be played on the human keyboard that this city provides.



III. Arshile Gorky
Agony, 1947
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

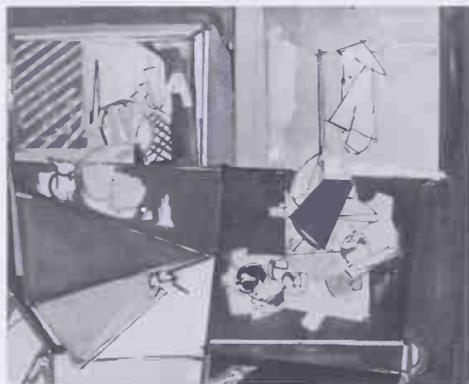
In his last paintings, of which *Agony* is an outstandingly fine example, Gorky was able to ally painterly eloquence to forms which epitomize the hurts which life had inflicted upon him. On the one hand, he opens the door upon the

charnel-house in which all human hopes and ambitions have their end; on the other, he achieved a fullness and a subtlety of color which was only just beginning to be within the reach of Abstract Expressionism.



29. Bradley Walker Tomlin
Still Life, 1939
Whitney Museum of
American Art, New York

Among the members of the First New York School, none was more delicate in his touch than Bradley Walker Tomlin. In this painting there are echoes of Picasso's *Studio with Plaster Head* (Volume 9), and of the stippling and graining of earlier Cubist practice, and of the subject matter—the flowers and fruit—of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist still life. This is therefore a transitional painting, but one in which an individual sensibility can already be discerned.



30. Hans Hofmann
Magenta and Blue, 1950
Whitney Museum of
American Art, New York

Hofmann was a big, square-built man with the kind of big, square-built ambition that made it possible for him to peak toward the end of his long life, rather than 30 years earlier. *Magenta and Blue* looks back to the classic French interiors which Matisse for one had brought to perfection; but it also looks forward to the day when Hofmann would be able to structure the painting in terms of large flat rectangles of pure color.

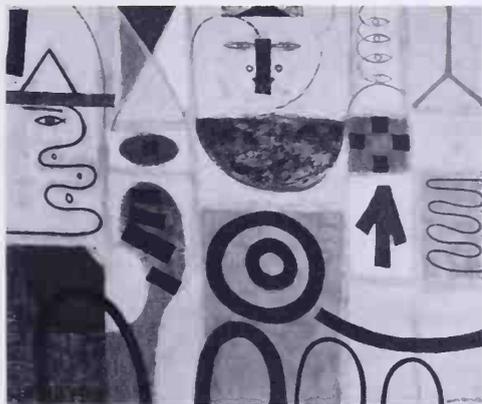
New York is also very good at processing new arrivals and making them its own. First- and second-generation immigrants made up the greater part of the New York School, along with country boys from Wyoming (Jackson Pollock) or from the coal-mining part of Pennsylvania (Franz Kline). Willem de Kooning was born in Holland, Mark Rothko in Russia, Arshile Gorky in Armenia, Hans Hofmann in Bavaria, and Barnett Newman's parents came

over from Polish Russia at the turn of the century; yet in the 1940s all these people were complete Americans. They were as committed to America as if their forefathers had come over with Columbus. What Thomas B. Hess has to say about Newman is true of all of them: that Newman was "a quintessential American. His passion to move with pragmatic curiosity and idealist self-confidence into the modern experience came not only from living an experience of freedom and independence in a new country, but also from an understanding of, and holding onto connections with, a European tradition."

Even so, major art can come about only when the tradition in question is the one that can most fruitfully be carried further. And there was no doubt in the 1940s that the future for art lay in a working alliance between the reasoned order of Cubist painting, with its emphasis on the virtues of equilibrium, and the demands of the liberated unconscious. Cubism in itself seemed to have nowhere to go (though Braque was to prove this mistaken); the heyday of European Surrealism seemed, equally, to be a thing of the past. Somehow the two might be made to work together by a mysterious multiplication. Hans Hofmann, for one, believed this: after spending years "sweating out cubism," by his own account, he said in 1944 that "the highest in art is the irrational." The task of the irrational was to release "the potential inner life of a chosen medium, so that the final image resulting from it expresses the all of oneself."

As far as any one sentence could define the mandate of the New York School, that one does it: the task of the painter was to release the potential inner life of his chosen medium, and in so doing to produce a final image that expressed "the all of oneself," unprecedentedly. As to the who, the when and the how of all this, the historian is free to tidy the record as he pleases: or, as Hess once said, to "make a seamless web of process out of what had been a shambles of false moves, happy accidents, and precious insights gained through heartbreaking labors." The artists themselves knew better. Willem de Kooning said in 1949 that "it is impossible to find out how a style began. I think that it is the most bourgeois idea to think that one can make a style beforehand."

One can accept the truth of this and still listen to those historians who were around in the 1940s. (What people thought at the time is fundamental to history, as I said earlier.) The basic position as set out by Hess, for example: "like all artists in the decade 1935–45, the New York painters were faced by a crisis in modernism that took the dramatic form of a clamping down on art—the Paris masters had stamped each approach with so personal a style that it seemed impossible to grow around, much less



31. Adolph Gottlieb
The Seer, 1950
The Phillips Collection,
Washington, D.C.



32. Adolph Gottlieb
Blue at Night, 1957
Virginia Museum of Fine
Arts, Richmond

Adolph Gottlieb around 1950 was a gifted exponent of the pictogram: the group of separate images, each set in its own compartment and piled up like the jars in an old-fashioned pharmacy. (Such an arrangement had echoes, moreover, of the ancient world.) From there he moved to the imagery which made him famous: the single circular form centered and hoisted high on the canvas, with overtones of eclipse, sunburst and nuclear explosion. An early example of this is *Blue at Night*; the form is oval and off center, while the jumble of forms below has still some of the alphabetical associations which have their role in the pictogram. But Gottlieb's particular brand of eloquence was nearing its definitive expression.

to move beyond them. . . . The Americans, like their contemporaries in Europe, faced what one artist has called a hotel full of rooms each marked 'Occupied.'"

Hess went on to say that "the solution that de Kooning and his colleagues (including such artists as Pollock, Motherwell, Newman, Kline, Rothko, Still, Gottlieb) attempted was to confront the European masters on their own ground and to work through their styles by changing the hypotheses. A shorthand way of expressing it would be to say that the Americans would



33. Philip Guston
If This Be Not I, 1945
Washington University
Gallery of Art, St. Louis

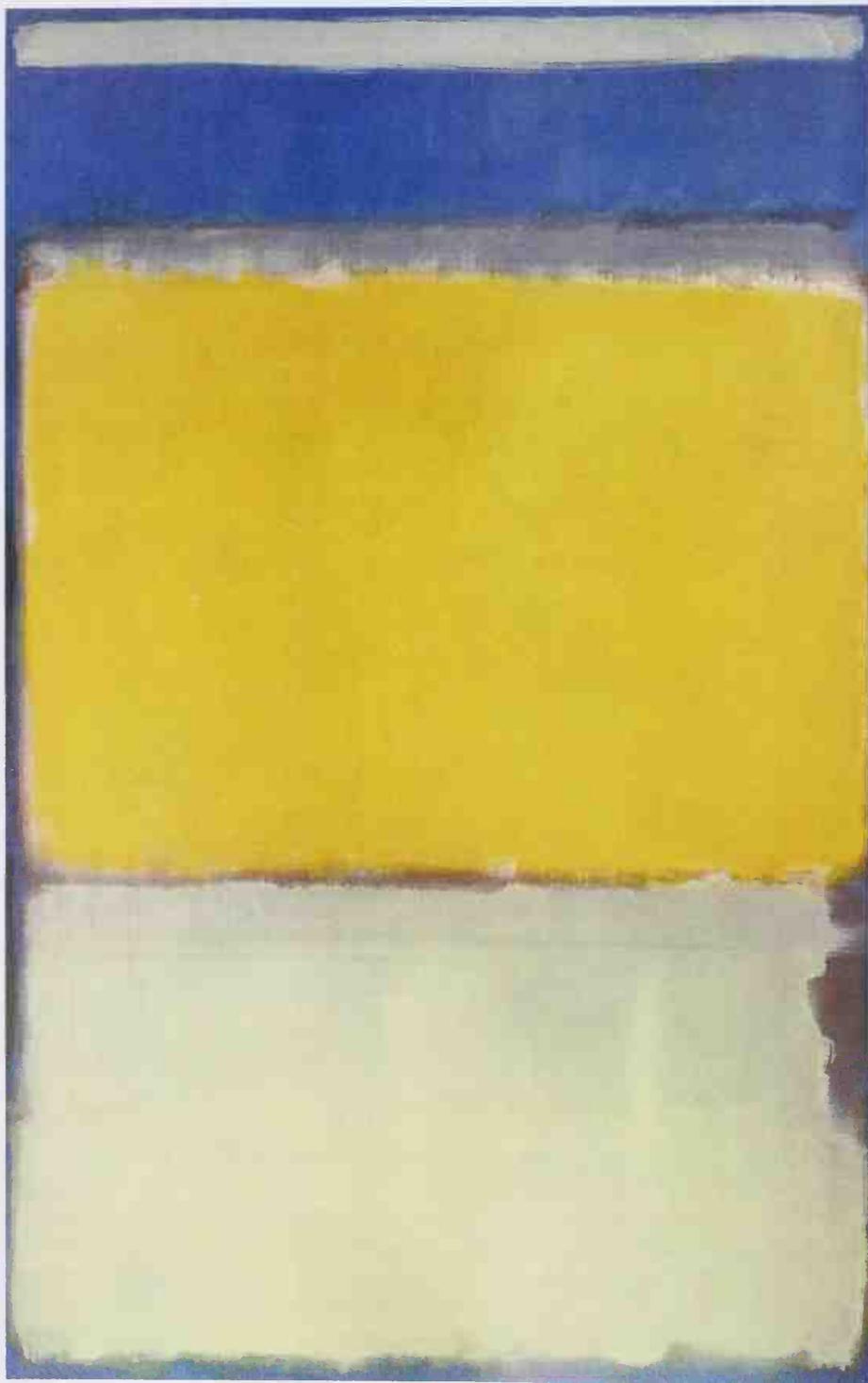


34. Philip Guston
Painting, 1954
The Museum of Modern
Art, New York

The evolution of the new American painting is shown with particular clarity in these two paintings by Philip Guston: the one a study of maskers adrift in a big city, the other a pure abstraction which might at first glance be a detail from one of the late paintings of Claude Monet. The delicacy of touch is the same in both paintings; but, beyond that, what a world of difference!

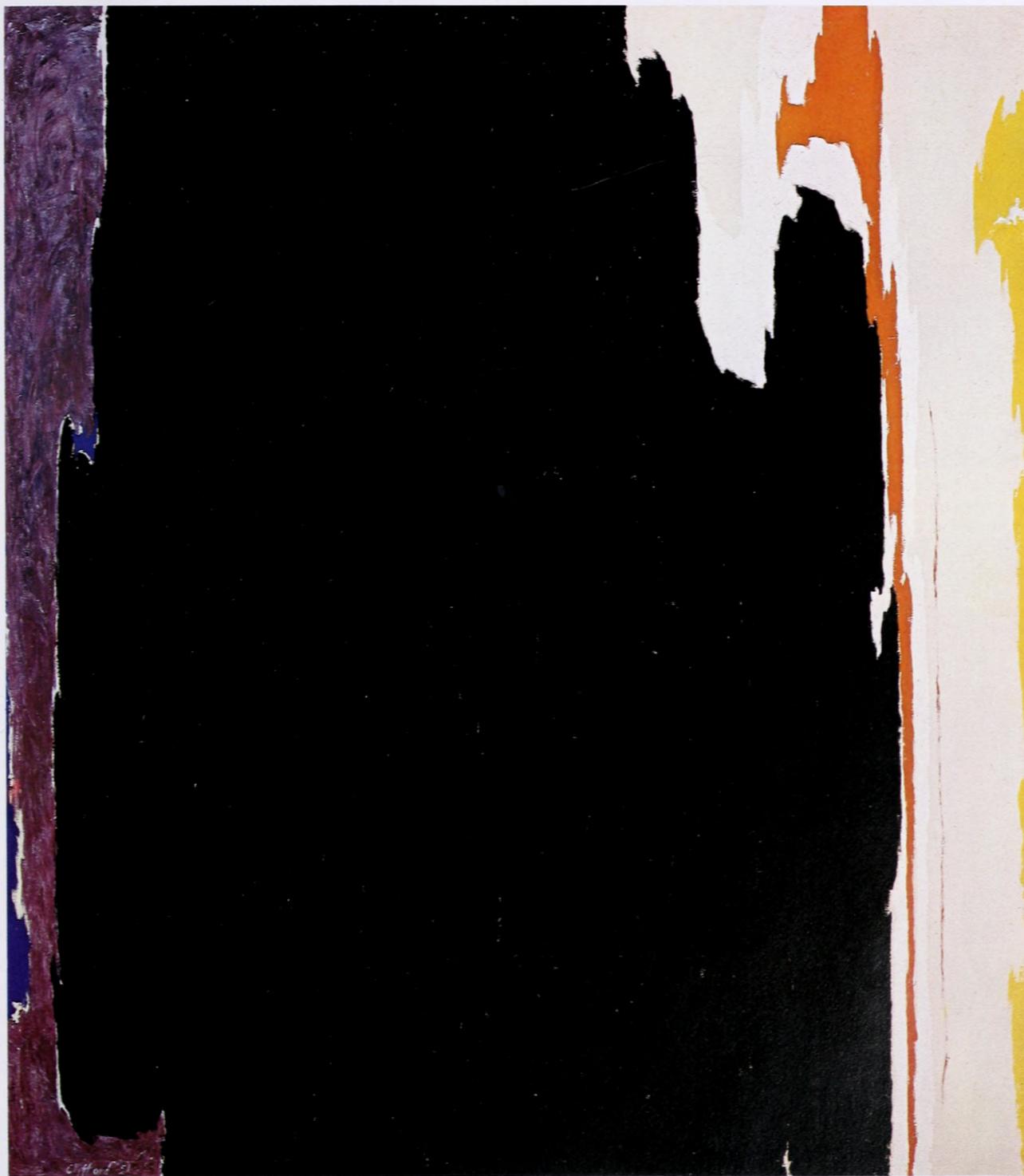
base their art on ethical rather than aesthetic pressures. They would turn their concentration inward, focus on the personal experience, express it as forcefully as possible and as efficiently as possible in pictorial terms." The question to be answered was "What can a man still do, with paints and canvas, to express the all of himself?"

As to the results of this, a large and ferocious literature is already in being. In situations of this kind the best thing is always to look at the work; for it was the work that made its way from



IV. Mark Rothko
Number 10, 1950
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Like many another American artist of his generation Mark Rothko came under the influence of European Surrealism in the 1940s. But even when he was using hybrid forms derived from that source he enveloped them in a fluid, dimensionless space of his own invention. By 1950 the hybrid forms had dropped out of sight and Rothko had arrived at the compositional device which he employed for the rest of his life: the juxtaposition of rectangular areas of paint in which color was allowed to bloom undisturbed either by drawing, by any suggestion of deep space, or by anything that could be called geometry. Within this basic schema, which might have appeared limited, he produced a huge and unexpectedly varied body of work. The enveloping poetry of his best paintings is owed not only to a superfine color sense but to shifts of emphasis, shifts of proportion, and a continual give and take between one floating shape and another.



V. Clyfford Still
Painting, 1951
The Museum of Modern Art,
New York

Clyfford Still prefers—and quite rightly—that his pictures should keep no company but their own. There is, about his vast fissured shapes and about his august and other-worldly color, something that rejects absolutely the idea of art as a superior distraction. “This is the most serious thing there is,” Still seems to say. As the art historian Robert Rosenblum pointed out in 1961, there is in this an echo of that craving for the sublime which is perhaps the most imperious of all motives for the making of art. There is also something of the archetypal American belief that no limits need be set to human ambition.

35. (below) Robert Motherwell
Elegy to the Spanish Republic, XXXIV, 1953–54
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y.

36. (right) Franz Kline
Two Horizontals, 1954
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Franz Kline knew New York when the elevated railway was still a fact of everyday life and the criss-cross of black girders high above a construction site was just beginning to replace the terraced houses of the last century. His mature paintings were in no sense portraits of that city; but in paintings like this one the headlong power of the slashed black-on-white derived from a townscape in which ruthless change was beginning to be taken for granted.



1943 onward. Between 1943 and 1950 there were substantial one-man shows in New York by Hofmann, Pollock, Gorky, Rothko, Still, Kline, Gottlieb, Newman, de Kooning and David Smith. What matters is to look at major paintings by these artists in the context of their first appearance.

"I think," de Kooning once wrote, "that innovators come at the end of a period. Cézanne gave the finishing touches to Impressionism before he came face to face with his 'little sensation.'" De Kooning was 44 when he wrote that, and 45 when he painted his *Excavation* in 1950 (pl. VI). He had at that time been concerned with art, part-time or full time, for 33 years. His first one-man show had been in April, 1948; and as a man in his 40s he had had plenty of time to put the "finishing touches" to the art of the immediate past. Now, with *Excavation*, he was completely himself. The painting is already set fast in history, but it is worthwhile to try to see it as it looked in 1950: a picture unlike any other.

It is a big picture, by the standards of its day. It came immediately after a long series of paintings in which de Kooning had expressly avoided the emotional associations of color. He had

used these black-and-white paintings as a way of crossing over, as it were, from drawing to painting. De Kooning is one of the great draftsmen of this century, with a variety of attack and a range of subject matter which are almost beyond comparison. He can do anything that he wants with line; and the line in question can be as thin as a silk thread or as broad as the nose of an orang-outan. And when he crossed over from drawing to painting at the end of the 1940s he used zinc white and a house-painter's black enamel to make forms which were completely flat, like the forms in late Cubism. They were not so much painted as *laid on*; and they related to the signs which had been devised by Arp and Miró to echo the human body without actually naming it. "Even abstract shapes must have a likeness," de Kooning once said. And in pictures like his *Painting*, 1948 (fig. 37), every shape has its likeness: its familiar companion, which stays within hailing distance but does not come forward to be identified.

As Hess has remarked, the black-and-white paintings are "packed to bursting with shapes metamorphosed from drawings of women which have been cut apart, transposed, intermixed until they were abstract, but always with a 'likeness' and a memory of their source and its emotive charge." (I should add that among the sources in question was the energy with which the Cubist masters had raided the outlines of guitar and violin for their affinities with the female body.)

After these black-and-white de Koonings, *Excavation* impresses at once by the overall fleshiness of its tonality. Color has come back into painting with an echo that is perfectly distinct: that of the pink and white and yellow of well-remembered Dutch womanhood. Color speaks, also, for something even more directly erotic: the red of human vents and orifices which have been taken by assault, the slashed black marking of the pubic triangle, the darting scarlet of an extended tongue. Color brings, finally, a rare intensity to the inset diamond-shapes which stand in *Excavation* for the human eye; the eye of the onlooker fuses, in this painting, with the eye of the participant.

The format of *Excavation* was one often used by the Flemish 17th-century master Jacob Jordaens for the meaty confrontations that made his name; and something of the history of figure painting in the Low Countries could be said to survive in this de Kooning. But, unlike Jordaens, de Kooning looks at the scene from no one point of view. The subject matter of *Excavation* is not so much composed as mapped, with no one incident taking precedence over the others. (We should remember that one of de Kooning's black-and-white paintings reminded him of a 17th-century Dutch engraving of a naval battle.) Faces, limbs, whole bodies form up and dissolve before our eyes. The story which



37. (above) Willem de Kooning
Painting, 1948
The Museum of
Modern Art,
New York

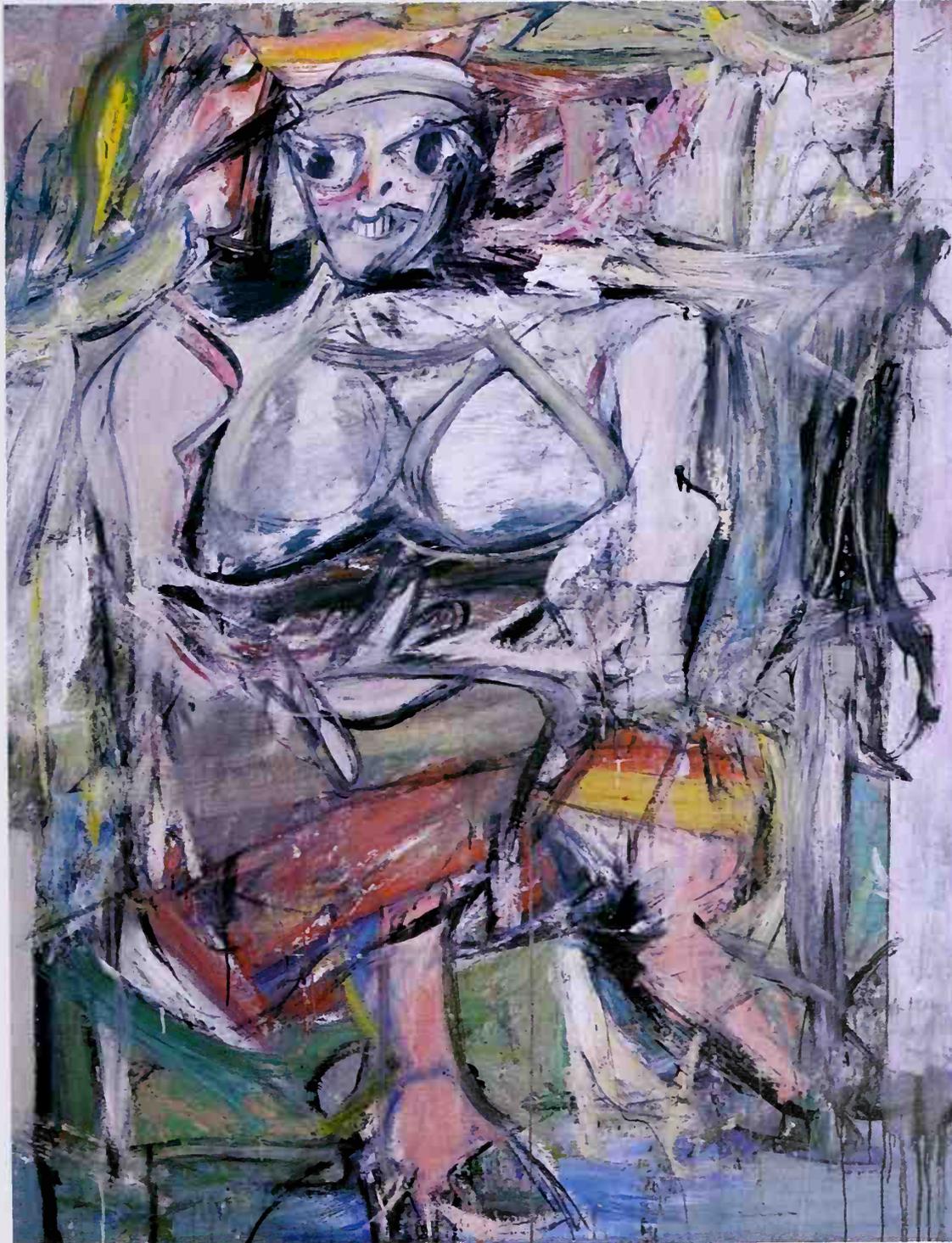


38. Willem de Kooning
Study for Woman, 1950
Thomas B. Hess,
New York

Long before Pop art was heard of, de Kooning found a new use for the peculiarly blatant come-on which is fundamental to American advertising. In this study for the *Woman* series he cut out a pair of scarlet lips with flawless teeth from an advertisement for Camel cigarettes in *Time* magazine and stuck it in, unaltered, as part of this little painting.



VI. Willem de Kooning
Excavation, 1950
The Art Institute of Chicago



VII. Willem de Kooning
Woman, I, 1950–52
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

In *Woman, I*, de Kooning gave painting its head with what looks to be a maximum of spontaneity. But in point of fact the picture cost him 18 months' hard work and was then put aside, only to be rescued at the suggestion of the art historian Meyer Schapiro and brought to a triumphal conclusion. The image was "painted out literally hundreds of times," Thomas B. Hess tells us; but it stood for a concept of imperious womanhood that would give the painter no rest until it had been set down on canvas.

this picture tells us has no beginning and no end; we can come in and go out as we please. What we are looking at has the tautly structured all-over scaffolding of Cubism—that moment in the development of European painting when, as de Kooning said in 1951, painters were given “a poetic frame where something could be possible, where the artist could practice his intuition.” But whereas Cubist painting was about stillness and equilibrium, *Excavation* is about the ways in which energy can find outlet in action.

In this painting, as in certain others of its date, what Ezra Pound had called a *style* came out of America. Action is what *Excavation* is all about, and Action Painting (a phrase first used by Harold Rosenberg in 1952) is as good a generic name as any for the “shower of wonders” which was produced in New York in the late 1940s. It is not an all-inclusive name—how could it be?—but it fits much of the work for much of the time. Both nouns count. “Action” stands for the particular physical involvement which characterizes the work; and it also stands for a determination to get up and go, rather than to settle for nostalgic imitation. “Painting” stands for the belief that there was still a great future for the act of putting paint on canvas. The way to realize that future was, first, to assimilate the past; second, to open out the act of painting in such a way that it became, in itself and by itself, one of the most capacious forms of human expression.

POLLOCK AND ACTION PAINTING

The man who brought this mimetic element most vividly to the notice of the public was Jackson Pollock; and it is with the name of Pollock above all that the notion of the new American painting is still associated. That this should be so is natural on more than one score. Pollock’s work has qualities of excitement and immediate seduction which make it stand out in any company; and Pollock was himself an archetypal American, a quasi-mythical figure who is as real to those who never knew him as Melville’s Captain Ahab or Scott Fitzgerald’s Dick Diver. When we look at a Pollock like *Autumn Rhythm*, 1950 (fig. 39), we see the American dream made visible. A country boy with country ways has made it to what looks like immortality; and whereas we are embarrassed for Ernest Hemingway when he talks of “taking on Tolstoy” it is perfectly reasonable to believe that in 1949 and 1950 Pollock took on the great Europeans of this century and survived.

He had had to work for it. His was both a complex and a wayward derivation, in which influences of a paradoxical and mutually contradictory sort had been not so much absorbed as fought

through, year by year. Some of the experiences which formed him will already be familiar to the reader: the massive black-and-white structure of Picasso’s *Guernica*, for instance, and the presence in New York in the early 1940s of artists like André Masson, who personified the concept of art as ritual. But whereas Masson was a sophisticated European who took a connoisseur’s delight in the magical aspects of primitive art, Pollock thought of American Indian sand painting as a part of his own inmost inheritance—to the extent, in fact, of keeping the Smithsonian Institution’s publication on the subject under his bed. There was nothing slapdash or opportunistic about his development; he always knew that he had a great deal to work through as a human being and a great deal to work through as an artist; and already in the 1930s there was a physical truculence about his work which revealed just how much it had cost him. It is easy to say, with hindsight, that his development as a painter could have been enormously accelerated if he had learned earlier (and he first registered at the Art Students League in New York in September, 1926) about “automatic writing” as it had been practiced since the early 1920s by the European Surrealists. But automatic writing is mere affectation if the writer has nothing to write about; and Pollock in the 1930s was not yet ready to tackle the chaos of the unconscious.

Every major artist has, as we have seen, an inbuilt psychic mechanism which tells him when to stop and when to go, when to hold back and when to let the work impose itself. Pollock had this capacity in a rare degree; in the 1930s he had contacts with the Mexican mural painter David Alfaro Siqueiros, who at that time had a great reputation. He learned from Siqueiros that it was permissible for art to be “ugly,” at first sight; that the wall, not the canvas on the traditional easel, was the natural dimension for a painter; and that the painter was entitled to shop around among the new materials and the new forms of industrial equipment which were then coming on the market. In this way Pollock in 1936 learned to use the airbrush and the spraygun. He also learned from Siqueiros to adopt a free, open, public approach to painting. Paintings were meant to be seen by everyone, Siqueiros said, and all means of attracting attention were valid. The painter was no longer a hermit, walled up in the studio with nothing between him and the taut little canvas but what Siqueiros called “a stick with hairs on the end of it.” Painting had become a hand to hand encounter between the painter and the wall (or the floor); and the painter was free to spray, pour, drip, throw or scatter the paint as he pleased.

Heady stuff, one might think. But Pollock did not, in point of fact, make full use of it for another ten years. Nor was he drawn to the simplistic topical subject matter which made Siqueiros



39. (above) Jackson Pollock
Autumn Rhythm, 1950
The Metropolitan Museum
of Art, New York

40. (below) Jackson Pollock
Guardians of the Secret, 1943
San Francisco Museum of Art

41. (below) Jackson Pollock
The She-Wolf, 1943
The Museum of Modern Art,
New York





VIII. Jackson Pollock
Number 1, 1948
The Museum of Modern Art, New York



IX. Jackson Pollock
Convergence (Number 10, 1952), 1952
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y.



42. Jackson Pollock
Full Fathom Five, 1947
The Museum of Modern Art, New York



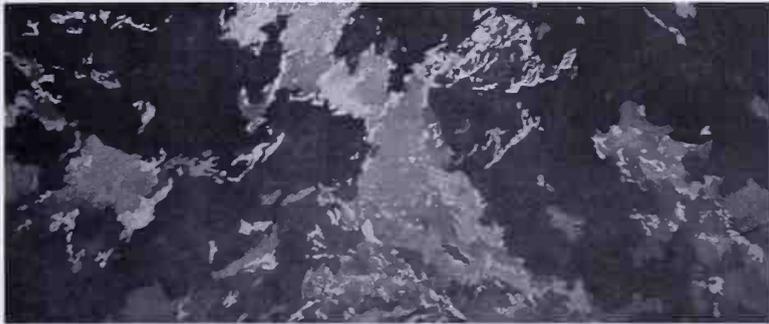
43. Claude Monet
Water Lilies (triptych: right panel), c. 1920
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Initially discounted as the rambling misadventures of a half-blind old man, Monet's *Water Lilies* series have come to be regarded as the point of departure of a new aesthetic, in which Impressionism found its long-delayed but logical culmination. Painting exists in these canvases as pure extent, with no contrived climaxes and no predetermined beginning or end.

famous: he concerned himself with wild private notions that could be tamed in terms of mythology (private or public, ancient or modern). The images which resulted were thickly worked: clotted, as much as drawn, and packed with references to ritual (often of a cruel and destructive sort). Pollock was aiming at that time for a ruthless, hieratic art from which the idea of human sacrifice was never far away.

In the 1940s two radical changes came over the work. Pollock learned to trust the automatic procedures through which impulses long buried within him found outlet; and he learned that the myth with which he could best occupy himself had nothing to do with the ancient world. It was, on the contrary, the myth of the artist as a continuing creator. Here his friend Robert Motherwell sized up the situation exactly when he wrote of Pollock in 1944 that "his principal problem is to discover what his true subject is. And since painting is his thought's medium, the resolution must grow out of the process of his painting itself."

And so it did: in Pollock's completely realized wall-size paintings of 1947–50, painting itself is the subject matter. Time has robbed these pictures of the aggressiveness which once seemed their most obvious characteristic, and it has also allowed us to look for ancestors where no ancestry had seemed plausible. Already in 1961 Robert Rosenblum related Pollock's *Number 1*, 1948 (pl. VIII), to the visionary nature-painting of J. M. W. Turner. The visitor to The Museum of Modern Art can move from *Num-*



44. Augustus Vincent Tack
Time and Timelessness, 1944
The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

In his ambitions, and in his achievement, Augustus Vincent Tack (1870–1949) was midway between the 19th-century Americans who attempted the sublime in landscape and the painters of the First New York School. The scale was there, and the sense of aspiration, and the de-focused all-over composition; but exalted effort still called at that time for specific subject matter—in Tack's case, mountain scenery.

ber 1 to Monet's *Water Lilies* and find in them a comparable continuum: a lateral expansion in which the tight focus of conventional landscape painting plays no part. (Unknown to Pollock, there were the mountainscapes of the American Augustus Vincent Tack to foreshadow, however faintly, the concept of the picture as something to get lost in.)

But when all that has been said, a Pollock of 1947–50 is still quite unlike any painting that had been before. As to why this was and where the difference lay, some explanation is needed. Certain misapprehensions should also be got out of the way. For instance it is often believed that Action Painting was rhetorical, if not melodramatic, in character and that it corresponded in some way to the existentialism which was then in high fashion. The existential attitude can be summarized, however incompletely, as one of lucid despair at our inability to divert, and still less to arrest, the course of history. In conversational terms the general idea was, "You can't win, but at least you can lose with your eyes open." What was then called "the literature of extreme situation" was existential in tone; and it emerged in many cases from the experience of life in those parts of Europe which were overrun by the Germans in World War II.

There was nothing of this in Action Painting. But the lives of the Action Painters could be interpreted, then and later, in terms of misfortune. Jackson Pollock and David Smith were killed in motor accidents; Franz Kline died of a heart attack at 52; Arshile

Gorky and Mark Rothko committed suicide. So it is worth emphasizing that the paintings done by Pollock in the late 1940s and early '50s are celebratory in intent. Pollock had his full share of private distresses, and some of them had found their way into his work with a ferocity not often paralleled; "birth, copulation and death" were his subjects, directly or indirectly, over and over again. Recognizable images pullulated in his work until 1945; they came back again after 1950; but in 1947–50 Pollock perfected a kind of picture in which the terms of painting—its basic predispositions—are redefined.

These pictures were abstract in a completely new way. Kandinsky had made large-scale abstract paintings before 1914; but, as was said earlier, there is no such thing as a form that has no likeness. Kandinsky's huge-scale Compositions are treasure houses of complex reference. Pollock in the late 1940s took the long history of line a stage further by inventing a formal statement that was neither a description nor an equivalence but the record of a self-sufficient activity. This activity was set free from the limitations of earlier art; whereas the drawn line is limited by the dimensions of the human arm, and whereas the line left by one loaded brush is further limited by the finite capacity of the brush itself, the poured or dripped line has a new elasticity and a power of extension which had not existed in painting before. (The sheer bigness of American Action Painting has, by the way, been exaggerated. Though large by the scale of the polite easel paintings which then ranked highest with the conservative collector, they were never large by the standards which Tintoretto or Rubens took for granted when an important commission was in question. Nor were they large by the standards of the prize paintings of the 19th century. The bigness of the new American painting lay rather in the size of the basic unit of expression: in this case, the line extended in such a way that the eye cannot establish either its beginning or its end. Newman, for one, liked the spectator to stand up close, so that he felt as if he were being sucked into the picture.)

Americans had learned in the 1930s to think of abstract painting in terms of either the strict blocking-out of geometrical forms or a jumble of evocative shapes which brought with them an immigrant's bundle of associations from the Old World. In 1944 Mondrian died in New York and Kandinsky died in Paris; thereafter, nothing much was forthcoming in the directions which they had pioneered. With Europe drained of energy by a six years' war, there was room for an American art to assert itself. In two full-hearted sentences, Harold Rosenberg in 1952 said how it looked at the time: "The American vanguard painter took to the white expanse of the canvas as Melville's Ishmael took to the

sea. On the one hand, a desperate recognition of moral and intellectual exhaustion; on the other, the exhilaration of an adventure over depths in which he might find reflected the true image of his identity."

A Pollock of 1947–50 undeniably acts out a drama of this kind: one man against the world. He was arguably the last great romantic artist: the last man to believe that with paint on canvas a man could encompass the whole and make new sense of it. Spontaneity was fundamental to what he did: "When I am *in* my painting," he wrote in 1947, "I'm not aware of what I am doing." But he was also a man who had thought through the whole adventure of European modernism and decided by 1944 that "American painters have generally missed the point of modern painting from beginning to end." The tensions of a great Pollock come from the fact that he did not simply "let go" in a self-indulgent way; impulse was the servant, in his case, of a profound historical understanding of what it remained for painting to do. A great painting is a painting about which people can differ widely and yet be right, every one of them; and in relation to a Pollock of 1950 we can accept the apocalyptic vision of Harold Rosenberg and yet equally well see what younger critics mean when they say that Pollock's true point of departure was the taut, all-over weave of Cubist painting as it was practiced by Picasso and Braque in 1910.

Pollock was not alone, among the members of the New York School, in having gone over the masterpieces of the recent past in Europe and ransacked them, one by one, for relevance. He was preceded in this by Arshile Gorky, who from 1925 onward was developing what Meyer Schapiro called a series of psychic son-father relationships with the European masters. He had, in this, the shrewdest of eyes for quality. (In the year 1926 there were not many curators or historians who would have said in print, as Gorky did, that Picasso and Matisse were greater than the Old Masters and that Cézanne "is the greatest artist, shall I say, that has ever lived.") Yet Gorky had no cultural affinities with French painting. He had come to the United States at the age of 15 as a quintessential outcast. Neither boy nor man, he had been uprooted before he had anything to leave behind him and he was pitched into American life with no money, no defined gift, and nowhere in particular to go. He was as denuded, in outward terms, as a man can be.

This was to become a classic 20th-century predicament: above all, in the late 1930s and early '40s. (The German poet Bertolt Brecht epitomized it when he enjoined posterity to "remember/ The bleak Age/ Which you have escaped"—an age in which whole populations moved from place to place, involuntarily,

"changing countries more often than shoes.") In the 1920s it happened above all to the young and obscure; such people had a sense of uncompleted identity when they came to America and could not even speak English (as in Gorky's case). They had the privilege, unthinkable in most earlier times, of a social mobility to which no limits need be set; but for most of them that privilege was nominal, inert, non-functioning. Constitutionally speaking, their children could end up in the White House; but meanwhile the cultural break called for a tour de force of adjustment for which few human beings are equipped.

These were the circumstances in which Arshile Gorky decided in 1925 to become a painter. It was in modern painting, as Gorky saw it, that the dignity of modern man was most securely upheld; modern art spoke a universal language which was especially moving to one who came, as Gorky did, from a linguistic minority; and he set himself to master the idioms of Cézanne and Picasso and Miró in such a way that eventually they would speak through him, and he through them. Of course he was one of thousands of artists who had an ambition of this sort; but he was unique in the gravity, the fine judgment, the hard-won professional skill with which he went about it. Nothing was allowed to interfere: when other painters were deflected by the Depression, or by a will to politicization, or by the imminence of war, Gorky kept right on. His studio was an ark, and inviolable. When times got bad, he just quadrupled his order for paints and canvas. It could have been, and it may even sound like, the determination of a dogged but talentless crank; but Gorky made himself in the end into one of those rare artists in whom every generation discovers for itself new areas of meaning. Emulation became one of the fine arts when he practiced it: and when his work took on a character of its own, in the 1940s, it was soon recognized both as the fulfillment of tendencies which had been latent in European Surrealism and as a personal document, a *journal intime* in which a man of outstanding gifts came to terms with the century.

André Breton, for one, was in no doubt that among artists who might be claimed as Surrealists, Gorky was the most gifted to have appeared since the late 1920s. At a time when most of what passed for Surrealism was pedestrian and literal in its idiom, Gorky gave a completely new twist to the notion of ambiguous or hybrid forms. In particular his *The Liver Is the Cock's Comb*, 1944 (pl. X), seemed to Breton to open the door wide onto a world of analogy which till then had been sealed off from painting. At a time when most Europeans either knew nothing of American art or frankly disdained it Breton saw just what Gorky was about.

"Those who like easy solutions will go unrewarded for their



X. Arshile Gorky
The Liver Is the Cock's Comb, 1944
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y.

In paintings such as the monumental *The Liver Is the Cock's Comb*, Gorky remembered the turbulence of Kandinsky's masterpieces of 30 years earlier (Volume 5). He also remembered the metamorphoses which Miró in the 1920s had inflicted upon the everyday life of the Catalan countryside (Volume 7).

But what he made of the combination of these two was completely personal to himself. It had, in particular, a richness of color and a ferocity in the reinvention of form which corresponded to his own ardent, searching and intransigent nature.

pains (such as they are)," Breton wrote. "Deter them as we may, they will insist on reading Gorky's pictures in terms of landscape, still life and the human figure. They will not dare to face up to those *hybrid* forms in which human feeling tends to present itself. A *hybrid* form results when we look at Nature and at the same time allow free passage to that flow of memories (from childhood and elsewhere) which an intense concentration before Nature will arouse in an observer who has the gift of emotion in its highest and rarest form. For I must emphasize that Gorky is, of all the Surrealists, the only one who maintains a direct contact with Nature and sits down in front of her to paint. Nature is not for him an *end*, however; he seeks in Nature such sensations as will serve him as a springboard toward the deeper exploration of certain states of being."

ARSHILE GORKY: SENSATION AS SPRINGBOARD

What this means in plain language is that someone had come along who could renew and refresh the biomorphic imagery of the 1920s and '30s. Gorky was a master of ambiguity, and he gave it an accent that was all his own. His biomorphs were quite distinct from those of Miró, Arp, Henry Moore or (to name the newest arrival) Matta. Moreover, most European Surrealists had invoked the illusion of deep space in their paintings and many had held fast to old-style notions of composition; Gorky in the 1940s did neither of these things. The space in his paintings looked merely an inch or two deep, as it had been in the Cubist paintings of Picasso and Braque in 1910; and whereas Matta's paintings of the 1940s could usually be broken down in terms of self-contained illustrative incidents, Gorky's could not.

This was true even when Gorky appeared to have defined his subject matter exactly. In 1942, for instance, he produced the three versions of his *Garden in Sochi* (fig. 45). One of these was bought by The Museum of Modern Art, and Gorky prepared for the Museum's archives a long statement about the garden in question, which had belonged to his father and stood, by his own account, "about 194 feet from the house." Visitors to the Museum could scour the picture for the wild carrots, the porcupines, the barren apple trees and the "patches of moss, like fallen clouds" which Gorky spelled out for them. They could also bear in mind that this was a place known as the Garden of Wish Fulfillment, and that the village women used to come and rub their naked breasts on the rocks to make their wishes come true. They could look, finally, for the "Holy Tree," which was hung with strips of cloth that pilgrims had torn from their own clothes. This holy tree, itself leafless, had therefore a covering of pseudo-



45. Arshile Gorky
Garden in Sochi, 1941
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

leaves which seemed to the young Gorky to rustle in the wind "like the silver leaves of poplars."

Chagall, for one, would have got a great deal of mileage out of detail of this sort; but the case of Gorky was more complicated. In the hybrid forms of these three paintings the things he spelled out for the catalogue reader were both *there* and *not there*. This is an extreme instance of the fact that no two people see the same picture. We can read into it what we will. Or, more exactly, it will summon, from our own unconscious, kindred but idiosyncratic memories with which we can complete the image. All pictures do this, in a varying degree; what is special about Gorky is that he unlocks the valve of private feeling with a particular sure gentleness. It is a mistake, as Breton said, to read his pictures literally. They should be to us what Nature was to Gorky: a springboard.

It is legitimate, even so, to take up one or two of the clues which he offers us. Most commentators agree that the strong vertical form at the top of the *Garden in Sochi* is the Holy Tree; some see a porcupine, to the right below, and blue rock and black earth in the lower part of the picture to the left. The idea, part visual, part tactile, of a human female breast held in the hand and rubbed against a rock is pure Gorky in its alliance of the unexpected with the voluptuous; and I don't see why we should

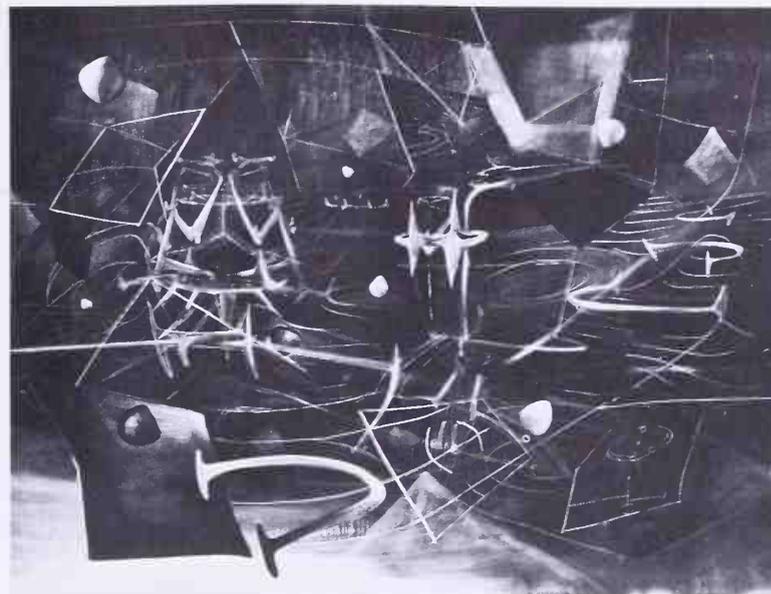


46. Arshile Gorky
The Betrothal, II, 1947
Whitney Museum
of American Art,
New York

not find echoes of it in the *Garden in Sochi*. Gorky did not define his images, and he defies us to define them for him; but when we concentrate on his paintings as intensely as he concentrated upon Nature we shall find that memories long “forgotten” come back to us and that, as in a successful psychoanalysis, we make constructive connections between aspects of our experience which had previously seemed to us quite unrelated.

Gorky does this for us because he was prepared to risk himself. He opened himself out, where earlier artists had kept themselves shut. Like one of Arthur Miller’s heroes, he allowed himself “to be completely known.” His work had nothing of the grand public quality which was the mark of Hofmann and Pollock in their major statements. It was addressed to one pair of eyes at a time, and it set up an ideal of human intercourse in which everything can be said: without fear and without reserve. Gorky took from other artists and never tried to deny it; but where Picasso and Miró, Matta and André Masson in the last resort defended their own privacy—with wit, with panache, with masks borrowed from other places and other times—Arshile Gorky was the man who kept nothing back. Like John Berryman in poetry, he allowed art to eat him alive.

Gorky’s was, therefore, an art of private reference: more so



47. Matta Echaurren
To Escape the Absolute, 1944
Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Slifka, New York

than Hofmann’s, more so than de Kooning’s, more so even than Pollock’s. The other three had by implication a heroic stance which went beyond autobiography; and this was true, equally, of Barnett Newman.

Newman doubtless had, in private, his full share of those sensations of loss and unease which were mandatory among responsible human beings in the dark middle of this century. But in his art he was concerned with healing, and with restoration, and with the ways in which an individual human nature can be at one with itself and with the universe. *Onement* (fig. 48) was the title he chose for the painting with which he broke through in 1948 to a way of painting that was entirely his own. *Concord* (pl. XI) was the title of a major painting of the following year. Now, Newman was very sensitive to language and he knew that *Onement* has overtones both of being “at one with the world” and of atonement in a specifically religious sense. *Concord* sets up likewise a complex vibration in our minds: concord as the aim of a fulfilled and humane society, *Concord* as a place-name that means much in American history, *Concord* the village as part of a pastoral New England still not too much contaminated. Newman thought everything through; and until he had thought everything through he refused to act.



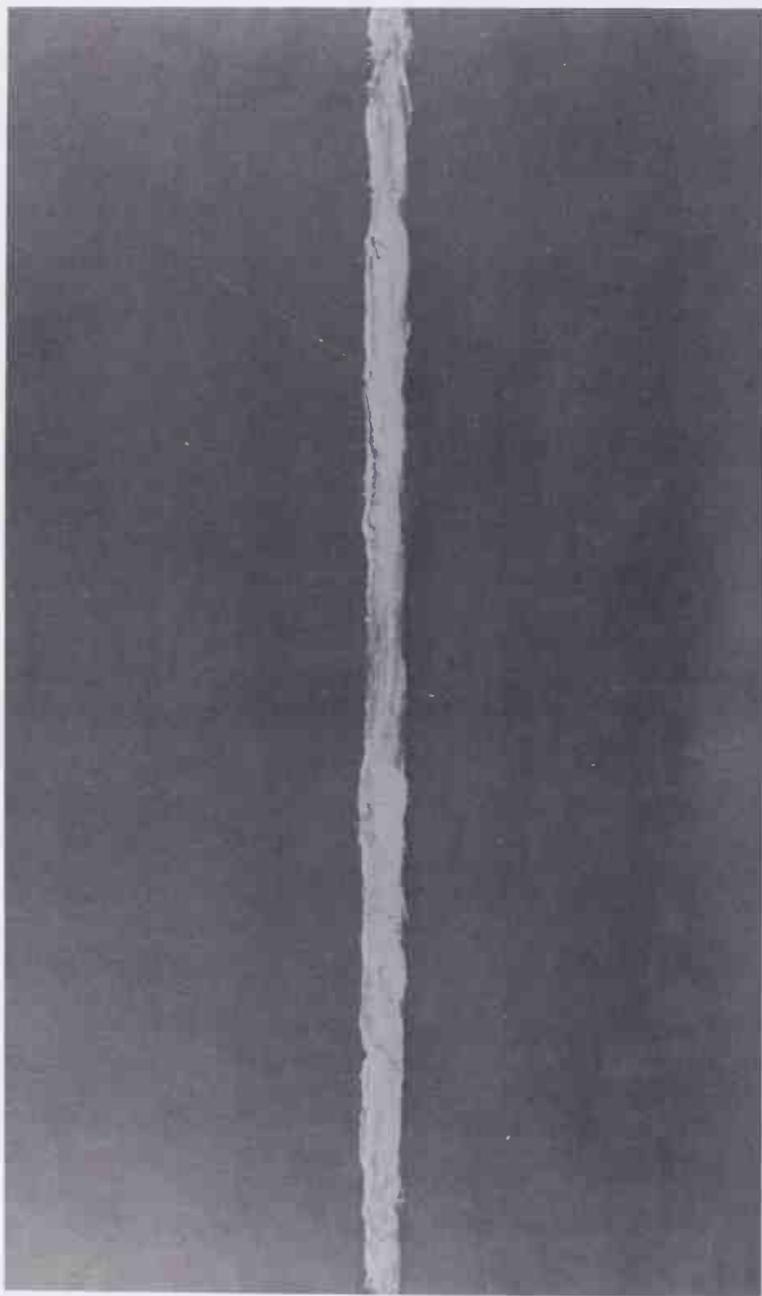
XI. Barnett Newman
Concord, 1949
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



XII. Barnett Newman
Vir Heroicus Sublimis, 1950–51
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Secreted in the middle of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* is a red square, eight feet by eight exactly. The uniform cadmium red of the large plain panels of color is tested, disputed, modified and generally investigated by slender “zips” which vary both in their hue and in their intensity. As Thomas B. Hess has said, “The effect of the painting is at the farthest remove from any idea of a diagram

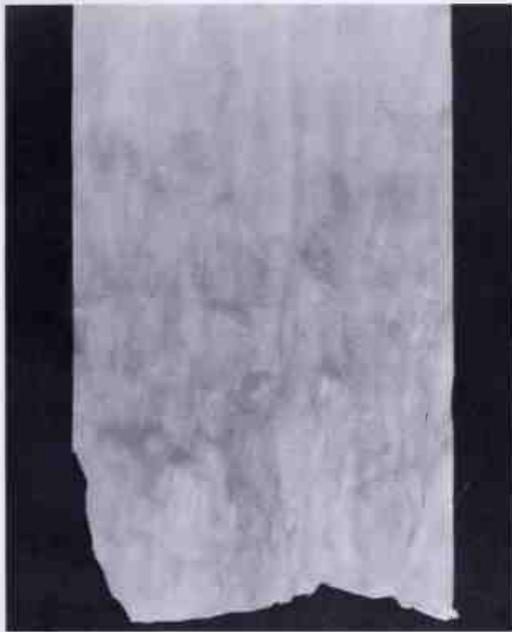
or a coldly articulated structure. The color envelops the spectator; the verticals stand as presences in it, like the angel sentinels who guard the Throne of the Lord.” The title is to be taken literally and not as rhetoric: for what is being celebrated here is man’s ability to master and order his experience as a fully responsible being.



48. Barnett Newman
Onement, I, 1948
Annalee Newman, New York

It is relevant to all this that Newman was not a high-minded recluse but a home-bred New Yorker who delighted in the look and the life of the city. He was involved in New York City to the extent of running for mayor, in 1933, at the age of twenty-eight. He ran on a ticket of his own devising, and he didn't get in; but Mayor La Guardia took up at least two of his proposals (for free art schools and a municipal opera) and New York would be a better place today if some of the others had been adopted also: notably the Clean Air Department, the Department which was to clean up the East River and the Hudson, and the establishment of extensive waterfront parks. He felt himself at home in every inch of New York, from The Metropolitan Museum to the improvised ballparks in out-of-the-way parking-lots. He was at ease—more so than any of his colleagues—in the world of abstract thought; but he was also a man who could go to the corner for a newspaper and be found there, two hours later, still locking horns in argument with the news vendor. It was not his way to stand aside from life; and he gave his best, unstintingly, in all situations, never looking round the room to see if the company was worth his while. But when thinking and writing about art, and above all when *making* art, he became an unsparing transcendentalist for whom art could be one thing only: a search for the hidden meaning of life.

In itself almost meaningless, that phrase was validated by Newman in the course of a five-years' period (1940–45) of preparation. Thinking, not doing, was fundamental to this: Newman made no pictures at that time, but he thought, and argued, and wrote—sometimes at great length—about what he saw as the central problem of mid-century art. "If we could describe the art of this, the first half of the 20th century, in a sentence," he wrote in 1944 or thereabouts, "it would read as the search for something to paint." One of the first facts about modernism was that the artist had at his disposal the art of all times and all places, much as Ezra Pound in the *Cantos* felt free to lift, and transpose, and adjust as he thought fit from the literature of other times, other peoples, other languages. "The new painter," Newman wrote, "has developed what is perhaps the most acute level of sensitivity to the grammar of art ever held by any painter in history." What to do with that grammar and that sensitivity was a problem not easily solved in 1944–45, when European art was out of sight and its derivatives were in decline. Art which relied on illustrative subject matter was clearly regressive, since (as Newman wrote in 1944) "the struggle against subject matter is the contribution the modern artist has made to world thought." "Yet," he went on, "the artist cannot paint without subject matter"; and when someone tried to do so the results were most

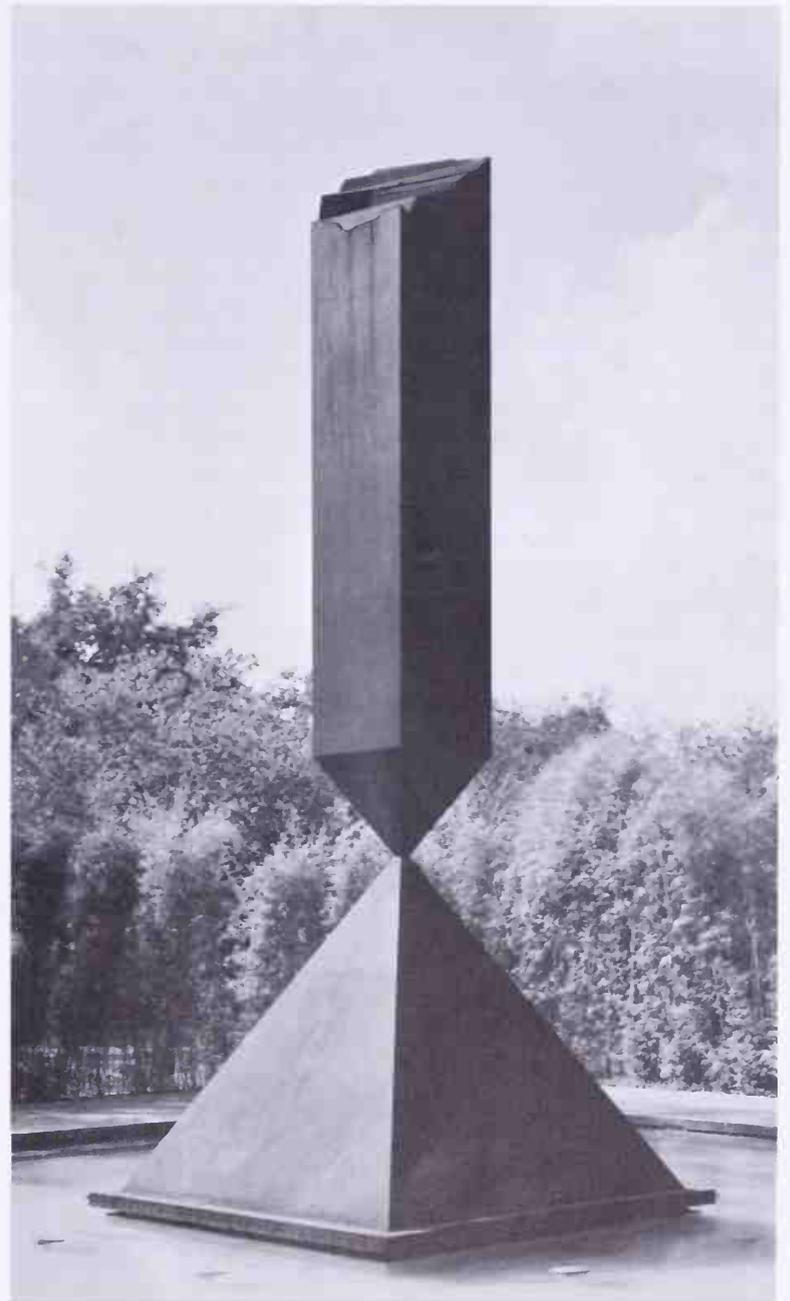


49. Barnett Newman
Achilles, 1952
Annalee Newman,
New York

Barnett Newman wrote in 1948 that "Greece named both form and content; the ideal form—beauty, the ideal content—tragedy." It seemed to him that in that context the European artist was "nostalgic for the ancient forms, hoping to achieve tragedy by depicting his self-pity over the loss of the elegant column and the beautiful profile." The American artist had by contrast "an opportunity, free of the ancient paraphernalia, closer to the sources of the tragic emotion." Alike in *Achilles* and *Broken Obelisk*, Newman gave a new twist (literally, in the case of the obelisk) to formulae which long use had made flaccid. In *Achilles*, the hero's giant stature and broken sword are hinted at but not described. As for the obelisk, it is as potent a symbol as we have of man's divided nature, one part of which is flawed forever.

often feeble. "Abstract art in America," he wrote on another occasion, "has to a large extent been the preoccupation of the dull, who by ignoring subject matter remove themselves from life to engage in a pastime of decorative art."

All this was the more dismaying in that the times called loud and clear for an art that would have something of their own dimensions. As a citizen, as a son, and as a husband, Newman had worked to redefine America: a straighter, braver, more forthright man never lived. From 1945 onward he had his full share of what he called "the new sense of fate." By this he meant that, in the potential of America, tragedy had taken the place of terror; there was nothing to be frightened of but the fact that America might prove unworthy of her responsibilities. This is fundamental



50. Barnett Newman
Broken Obelisk, 1963–67
Institute of Religion and Human Development, Houston, Tex.

to the situation of whatever country dominates all the others; but it needs, each time round, a new resolution. The age cried out for wisdom, in 1945, and it was for the artist to respond as best he could.

It was in 1949 that Newman at last began to come up with his answer. As with much of the best art of this century, the results did not, to begin with, look like art at all. He was probably, in that sense, the most forbidding of the New York School. A big Pollock like *Number 1* gives off a sense of untrammelled energy which is highly contagious. There is about de Kooning's women a sexual provocation that is like a live wire left unsheathed. Hofmann had so meaty, so emphatic a way with paint that we just have to stop and look. But a Newman of 1949–51 is likely to consist of a large plain rectangle of uninflected color with one, two, three or at most four thin straight vertical stripes that run from top to bottom of the canvas. He did not make things easy.

Stripes of a comparable kind had been turning up in his paintings ever since he returned to the easel in 1945. They had, however, been combined either with textured backgrounds or with subject matter of a symbolic sort. Thomas B. Hess had described how Newman came to realize that a picture did not have to have embellishments of that sort: "He kept his motifs separate from the backgrounds by masking them with tape. On his birthday, January 29, 1948, he prepared a small canvas with a surface of cadmium red dark (a deep mineral color that looks like an earth pigment—like Indian red or a sienna) and fixed a piece of tape down the center. Then he quickly smeared a coat of cadmium red light over the tape, to test the color. He looked at the picture for a long time. Indeed he studied it for some nine months. He had finished questing."

It is possible to respond to Newman's paintings without knowing what he intended by them, just as it is possible to enjoy the Noh plays without understanding Japanese, or to enjoy the love-duet in Act I of Wagner's *Die Walküre* without realizing that the two people concerned are brother and sister. It will somehow get through to any sympathetic observer that Newman was up to something very grand, and that the picture on the wall results from an exemplary commingling of science and hard labor and love. It could have been, as a matter of hypothesis, that there was nothing more to the pictures than what they yield at first sight; but this never quite accounted for the thralldom of paintings in which there was nothing whatever in the way of spectacular incident. Nor was it in line with Newman's ambitions for art, or with his low opinion of earlier American abstract painting, that they should yield no more than a retinal satisfaction.

At the very least—so it seemed at the time—there were com-

plex and subterranean mathematical procedures behind the terminal simplicity of his paintings. Newman had been planning since 1944 to "achieve feeling," as he put it, "through intellectual content." He was interested in numbers, for their own sake, and he had that preoccupation with measurement which we earlier traced, as an American trait, way back into the 19th century. He felt such things instinctively, but he did not exploit them as closed systems. He remembered, rather, that to measure the unmeasurable is a part of Jewish mystical experience.

In this, as in much else here, I follow the reading proposed by Hess, who was for many years a close friend of Newman. Something in what he says could be inferred by any intelligent person: the difference, for example, between the clean, sharp, straight look of the vertical stripe ("zip" was Newman's name for it) as it appears in *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, 1950–51 (pl. XII), and the soft, smoky, irregular look of the same element as it appeared in the original *Onement* and in many later paintings. Even in reproduction that difference is quite clear: but when we are in front of the real thing the zips stand for a contrasted gamut of experience which runs all the way from a stark, wandlike look to something that has been breathed on, edged this way and that, smudged and softened, and yet retains the affirmative vertical principle.

Hess goes deeply into this, suggesting that the painterly zip, with its wayward but in the end resolutely upright thrust, may stand for the newly created Adam. Self-evidently the product of a human hand (of one of Adam's offspring, therefore, at however many removes) it also stands for "the physical sphere—that which is touched, felt, informed by the manipulation of the artist." "On the other hand," Hess goes on, "the taped, clean-edged smooth zip could refer to the more intellectual sphere, assuming the presence of an abstract force of division—as God separated the waters and the firmament in Genesis." (Mrs. Newman once proposed a simpler explanation: that the two forms of stripe stood for "the he and the she of it"—a form of polarization which Newman would neither confirm nor deny.) Such notions can be ridiculed: but it is relevant that Newman believed that art should have subject matter and that he was not interested in making agreeable patterns on canvas. Few people would dispute the fact that his *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* is one of the monuments of the New York School in its opening phase (1945–51, let us say). It is possible to see it simply as a magisterial move in that long campaign for the liberation of color which began in France before 1900; the zips are there, on that reading, to intensify the effect of the great field of cadmium red that runs the whole length of the painting. Even the dimensions of the painting can be seen as an attempt to outdo the scale on which Jackson Pollock had



51. Barnett Newman
Here I (To Marcia), 1950
Annalee Newman, New York

lately been working. But the picture sustains a loftier interpretation—and one that is more in tune both with Newman's quality as a human being and with his exalted notion of the role of art in society. When the art historian Erwin Panofsky challenged the title of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*—suggesting in effect that it was mere empty rhetoric—Newman was able to beat him down in open debate; and I think we can go along with Thomas B. Hess in believing that the secret symmetry which runs throughout *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (and the use, for that matter, of the number 18, there and elsewhere in Newman's work) are not devices to pass an idle moment between one picture and another in a museum but references to Genesis, to the primal creative act, and to the invisible God of the Kabbalists.

I cannot claim in these few pages to have covered the major figures of the New York School in their entirety. Even in the period under review, which ends in 1951, other men, other works and other media should ideally be included. Other dialogues—with the American past, with the European masters, with the notion of an art that would lie beyond the range of the art market—could also be spelled out in detail. Something could also be said about the coincidence (if it is one) by which these artists came to fulfillment at the apogee of American power: political, military, economic. What I have tried to suggest is that art, like nature, abhors a vacuum; that there was a job to be done in the United States in the late 1940s, just as there had been a job to be done in Paris between 1885 and 1914; and that for the first time American artists proved equal to a span of involvement that ranged from the most intimate disorders of the psyche to what is called in Jewish mysticism "the everlasting unity and presence of Transcendence."

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Dimensions: height precedes width; another dimension, depth, is given for sculpture and constructions where relevant. Foreign titles are in English, except in cases where the title does not translate or is better known in its original form. Asterisked titles indicate works reproduced in color.

Anonymous

Meditation by the Sea, c. 1850–60 (fig. 7)
Oil on canvas, 13½ x 19½ inches
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
M. and M. Karolik Collection

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Steelworkers—Noontime, c. 1880–82 (fig. 10)
Oil on canvas, 17 x 24 inches
Private collection

Bingham, George Caleb
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Raftsmen Playing Cards, 1847 (fig. 2)
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The St. Louis Art Museum

Calder, Alexander
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The Brass Family, 1929 (fig. 22)
Brass wire, 64 x 41 x 8½ inches
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Davis, Stuart
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House and Street, 1931 (fig. 20)
Oil on canvas, 26 x 42¼ inches
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

- Eakins, Thomas
(1844–1916)
- * *Max Schmitt in a Single Scull*, 1871 (pl. I)
Oil on canvas, 32¼ x 46¼ inches
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Alfred N. Punnett Fund and gift of
George D. Pratt, 1934
- Perspective Drawing for John Biglen in a Single
Scull*, c. 1873–74 (fig. 5)
Pencil, 27¾ x 45½ inches
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Gift of Cornelius V. Whitney
- The Gross Clinic*, 1875 (fig. 1)
Oil on canvas, 96 x 78 inches
Jefferson Medical College of Philadelphia
- Gorky, Arshile
(1905–48)
- The Artist and His Mother*, 1926–29 (fig. 26)
Oil on canvas, 60 x 50 inches
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
Gift of Julien Levy for Maro and Natasha Gorky
in memory of their father
- Staten Island*, 1927–28 (fig. 27)
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Mr. and Mrs. Hans Burkhardt, Los Angeles
- Study for Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia*,
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Pencil on paper, 22¼ x 28¾ inches
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of Richard S. Zeisler
- Garden in Sochi*, 1941 (fig. 45)
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The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Wolfgang S. Schwabacher
- * *The Liver Is the Cock's Comb*, 1944 (pl. X)
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- * *Agony*, 1947 (pl. III)
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- The Betrothal, II*, 1947 (fig. 46)
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- Blue at Night*, 1957 (fig. 32)
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- If This Be Not I*, 1945 (fig. 33)
Oil on canvas, 41½ x 54½ inches
Washington University Gallery of Art, St. Louis
- Painting*, 1954 (fig. 34)
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The Museum of Modern Art, New York
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- Henri, Robert
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- The Masquerade Dress: Portrait of
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The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
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- Landscape*, 1936 (fig. 23)
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- The Nooning*, 1872(?) (fig. 6)
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- Hopper, Edward
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- Painting*, 1948 (fig. 37)
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- * *Excavation*, 1950 (pl. VI)
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Mr. and Mrs. Frank G. Logan Purchase Prize,
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Elegy to the Spanish Republic, XXXIV, 1953–54
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Cider Making, 1840–41 (fig. 4)
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Purchase, Charles Allen Munn Bequest, 1966

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Razor, 1922 (fig. 19)
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* *Vir Heroicus Sublimis, 1950–51* (pl. XII)
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Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ben Heller

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San Francisco Museum of Art
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The She-Wolf, 1943 (fig. 41)
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