

# 19

## Abstract Expressionism and the New American Art

**L**ooking back on the forties, the American painter Barnett Newman recalled that artists of his generation:

felt the moral crisis of a world in shambles, a world devastated by a great depression and a fierce world war, and it was impossible at that time to paint the kind of paintings that we were doing—flowers, reclining nudes, and people playing the cello. ... This was our moral crisis in relation to what to paint.

In 1942, immediately after the United States's entry into World War II, the dominant styles of painting were still Social Realism and Regionalism (see chapter 18). The war contributed to a ferment that brought on the creation of the first major original direction in the history of American painting, Abstract Expressionism, or, as it is more generically called, the New York School. Attitudes conditioned by the war—a sense of alienation and a loss of faith in old systems and old forms of expression—led artists to explore a broad range of intellectual thought from existentialism to the theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. The devastation of Europe's cultural centres by the second major war in three decades created a vacuum in the artworld that New York was poised to fill. Moreover, the emerging polarized politics of the Cold War lent weight to what was perceived as the quintessential Americanness of Abstract Expressionism—its vitality, spontaneity, and confident scale—as a counter to the popular Western image of communist culture as drab, impoverished, and state-dominated.

### Entering a New Arena: Modes of Abstract Expressionism

The diverse group of artists involved were opposed to all forms of Social Realism and any art form that smacked of nationalism. Nonetheless, a number of them had connections with the American West and to a degree cultivated an anti-European stance. Much as they admired Mondrian, who was present in New York by 1940, they also rejected

as trivial the pure geometric abstraction, promoted within the ranks of the American Abstract Artists (AAA), that his art had engendered in America. On the other hand, the relationship of the new movement to the European Surrealists, some of whom also sought refuge from the war in New York, was critical. The Americans were particularly drawn to the organic, abstract, automatist Surrealism of Matta, Miró, and Masson (see chapter 15). Matta, who was in New York from 1939 to 1948, helped introduce the idea of psychic automatism to the Abstract Expressionists. The Americans were less concerned with the new method as a means of tapping into the unconscious than as a liberating procedure that could lead to the exploration of new forms.

The artworld of the forties was far from a coherent community. The experience of the Federal Arts Project of the WPA had provided a degree of camaraderie among artists, but largely the artists of the New York School gathered informally in their studios and in the cafeterias and taverns of Greenwich Village to discuss—and sometimes to battle over—the burning artistic issues of the day. Peggy Guggenheim's gallery, Art of This Century, featured European Surrealists but also became a venue for young artists like Clyfford Still, Robert Motherwell, and, especially, Jackson Pollock. A handful of other dealers and a few critics, notably formalist critic Clement Greenberg, as well as Harold Rosenberg and Thomas Hess, eventually championed the new movement. Greenberg's conception of modernism, in particular, was highly influential. In a 1954 lecture, later published in 1961 as *Art and Culture*, he advanced the idea that art's ability to connect powerfully with human experience is independent of any representational qualities it may have. Recognition by major museums came more slowly. The Museum of Modern Art began to acquire works by a few of the artists in the mid-forties and to include their work in group exhibitions devoted to contemporary American art. By 1958 a kind of international apotheosis of Abstract Expressionism took place with the museum's exhibition *The New American Painting*, which was devoted to the movement and toured

eight European countries. Created at a point at which American money and popular culture were flooding Europe, the exhibition served as an assertion of American dominance in high culture as well.

Although Abstract Expressionism is as diverse as the artists involved, in a very broad sense two main tendencies may be noted. The first is that of the so-called gestural painters, concerned in different ways with the spontaneous and unique touch of the artist, his or her “handwriting,” and the emphatic texture of the paint. It included such major artists as Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Franz Kline. The other group consisted of the Color Field painters, concerned with an abstract statement in terms of a large, unified color shape or area. Here one can include Rothko, Newman, Still, and Gottlieb, as well as, to a degree, Motherwell and Reinhardt. In 1948 several of these painters founded an informal school called the “Subjects of the Artist.” They were united by their belief that abstract art could express universal, timeless themes. As they had stated in a letter to *The New York Times*, “There is no such thing as a good painting about nothing.” “We assert that the subject is crucial,” they wrote, “and only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless.” Even at its most abstract, art could convey a sense, in Rothko’s works, of “tragedy, ecstasy, and doom.”

## The Picture as Event: Experiments in Gestural Painting

In 1952 Harold Rosenberg coined the phrase “action painting” to describe the process by which the spontaneous gesture was enacted on the canvas. He wrote:

At a certain moment, the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyze or ‘express’ an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.

What the term “action painting” failed to account for was the balance that these artists struck between forethought and spontaneity; between control and the unexpected.

### Hofmann

The career of Hans Hofmann (1880–1966) encompassed two worlds and two generations. Born in Bavaria, Hofmann lived and studied in Paris between 1903 and 1914, experiencing the range of new movements from Neo-Impressionism to Fauvism and Cubism. He was particularly close to Robert Delaunay (see chapter 10), whose ideas on color structure were a formative influence. In 1915 Hofmann opened his first school in Munich. In 1932 he moved to the United States to teach, first at the University of California, Berkeley, then at New York’s Art Students League, and finally at his own Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts in New York and in Provincetown,

Massachusetts. Hofmann’s greatest concern as a painter, teacher, and theoretician lay in his concepts of pictorial structure, which were based on architectonic principles rooted in Cubism. This did not prevent him from attempting the freest kinds of automatic painting. A number of such works executed in the mid-forties, although on a small scale, anticipated Pollock’s drip paintings.

During the last twenty-six years of his life, Hofmann made abstractions of amazing variety, ranging from a precise but painterly geometry to a lyrical expressionism. In his best-known works, Hofmann used thick, rectangular slabs of paint and aligned them with the picture’s edge (fig. 19.1), demonstrating his ideas about color as a space-creating device. While the rectangles of color affirm the literal flatness of the picture, they also appear to advance and recede spatially, creating what Hofmann called a “push and pull” effect. Like his fellow German emigré Josef Albers, Hofmann was one of the premier art educators and theoreticians in the United States, and his influence on a generation of younger artists such as Lee Krasner (see fig. 19.14) and critics including Clement Greenberg was enormous.



19.1 Hans Hofmann, *The Gate*, 1959–60. Oil on canvas, 6'2½" × 4'¼" (1.9 m × 1.23 m). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

## Gorky

Armenian-born **Arshile Gorky** (1905–48) was a seminal figure in the early years of the New York School. He was a largely self-taught artist whose work constituted a critical link between European Surrealism and American Abstract Expressionism. Gorky arrived in the United States in 1920, a refugee from the Turkish campaign of genocide against the Armenians. His early experiments with both figuration



**19.2** Arshile Gorky, *The Artist and His Mother*, c. 1929–36. Oil on canvas, 60 × 50" (152.4 × 127 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

and abstraction were deeply influenced by Cézanne and then Picasso and Miró. He achieved a distinctive figural mode in *The Artist and His Mother* (fig. 19.2), a haunting portrait based on an old family photograph in which the artist posed beside his mother, well before she died of starvation in his arms.

By the early forties, Gorky was evolving his mature style, a highly original mode of expression that combined strange hybrid forms with rich, fluid color. One of his most ambitious paintings, *The Liver Is the Cock's Comb*, 1944 (fig. 19.3), is a large composition that resembles both a wild and vast landscape and a microscopically detailed internal anatomy. Gorky combined veiled but recognizable shapes, such as claws or feathers, with overtly sexual forms, creating an erotically charged atmosphere filled with softly brushed, effulgent color. His biomorphic imagery owed much to Kandinsky and Miró, whose works Gorky knew well, and to the Surrealist automatism of Masson and Matta, both in New York in the forties. The year he made this painting, Gorky met André Breton, the self-appointed leader of the Surrealists, who took a strong interest in his work and arranged for it to be shown at a New York gallery in 1945.

Although its subject is deliberately ambiguous, the 1947 painting *The Betrothal II* is one of three compositions of the same title that Gorky built around the central image of a man on horseback. Over a delicate linear scaffolding, the artist applied transparent washes of muted color, leaving visible the tracks of his brush. It was this kind of dynamic balance between representational and figurative motifs that appealed to Gorky's contemporaries like de Kooning. Following a series of traumatic events, Gorky



**19.3** Arshile Gorky, *The Liver Is the Cock's Comb*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 6'1¼ × 8'2" (1.9 × 2.5 m). Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York.

changed himself in his studio in 1948, just as his fellow Abstract Expressionists, whose work was indebted to his example, were gaining serious momentum in New York.

### Willem de Kooning

Willem de Kooning (1904–97) was a central figure of Abstract Expressionism, even though he was not one of the first to emerge in the public eye during the forties. Born in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, de Kooning underwent rigorous artistic training at the Rotterdam Academy. He came to the United States in 1926, where, throughout the thirties, he slowly made the transition from house painter, commercial designer, and Sunday painter to full-time artist. Of the utmost importance was his early encounter with Stuart Davis, Gorky, and the influential Russian-born painter John Graham, “the three smartest guys on the scene,” according to de Kooning. They were his frequent companions to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it was possible to see examples of ancient and old-master art. Although he did not exhibit until 1948, de Kooning was an underground force among younger experimental painters by the early forties.

One of the most remarkable aspects of de Kooning’s talent was his ability to shift between representational and abstract modes, which he never held to be mutually exclusive. He continued to make paintings of figures into the seventies, but even many of his most abstract compositions contain remnants of or allusions to the figure. “Even abstract shapes must have a likeness,” he said. In the late forties he made a bold group of black-and-white abstractions in which he had fully assimilated the tenets of Cubism, which he made over into a dynamic, painterly idiom. Using commercial enamel paint, he made a largely black composition, *Painting*, through which he spread a fluid network of white lines, occasionally allowing the medium to run its own course down the surface (fig. 19.4).



19.4 Willem de Kooning, *Painting*, 1948. Enamel and oil on canvas, 42 $\frac{1}{2}$  × 56 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (108.3 × 142.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



19.5 Willem de Kooning, *Woman, I*, 1950–52. Oil on canvas, 6'3 $\frac{3}{4}$ " × 4'10" (1.9 × 1.47 m). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Certain recognizable forms—a hat and glove at the upper right—can be detected. Elsewhere in the picture, de Kooning subsumed figurative references within rhythmically flowing lines, creating vestigial forms that function as his characteristic shorthand for the human body. After *Painting* was shown in de Kooning’s first solo show in New York, it was acquired by The Museum of Modern Art, and de Kooning thus emerged publicly as one of the pioneers of a new style.

While he was making his black-and-white compositions, de Kooning was also working on large paintings of women. In 1950 he began what became his most famous canvas, *Woman, I* (fig. 19.5). This monumental image of a seated woman in a sundress is de Kooning’s overpowering, at times repellent, but hypnotic evocation of woman as sex symbol and fertility goddess. Although the vigorous paint application appears entirely improvisatory, the artist labored over the painting for eighteen months, scraping the canvas down, revising it, and, along the way, making countless drawings—he was a consummate draftsman—of the subject. When his paintings of women were exhibited in 1953, de Kooning, who once said his work was “wrapped in the melodrama of vulgarity,” was dismayed when critics failed to see the humor in them, reading them instead as misogynist. He said his images had to do with “the female painted through all the ages, all those idols,” by which he could have meant a Greek Venus,



**19.6** Willem de Kooning, *Gotham News*, 1955. Oil on canvas, 5'9" x 6'7" (1.75 x 2 m). Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York.

a Renaissance nude, a Picasso portrait, or a curvaceous American movie star, with her big, ferocious grin. Over the years when he was questioned about his paintings of women, de Kooning emphasized the dual nature of their sexual identity, claiming they derived partly from the feminine within himself. By the mid-fifties the women paintings gave way to compositions sometimes called "abstract urban landscapes," which, with their slashing lines and colliding forms, reflect the lively, gritty atmosphere of New York City streets. In *Gotham News* (fig. 19.6) de Kooning dragged charcoal through wet paint, churning up the surface to create a heated atmosphere that pulsates with an intense, metropolitan beat. This is a quintessential example of gestural Abstract Expressionism, with the hand of the artist, the emotion-packed "gesture," everywhere apparent.

In the sixties, de Kooning moved to a large, light-filled studio on Long Island where he continued his exploration of the woman theme, although, as he said, in a more "friendly and pastoral" vein. In *Two Figures in a Landscape* (fig. 19.7), the figures are barely decipherable amid baroque flourishes of lush, liquid medium. De Kooning continued to paint brilliantly into the eighties (he stopped in 1990 because of debilitating illness), and, although the works are largely abstract, the suggestion of figures lurks in the curving folds of paint (fig. 19.8). Here, in his characteristic light, delicate palette of rose, yellow, green, blue, and white, de Kooning has decelerated his violent brushstroke into a grandly fluid, almost Rubenesque flow of graceful color shapes.



**19.7** Willem de Kooning, *Two Figures in a Landscape*, 1967. Oil on canvas, 5'10" x 6'8" (1.8 x 2 m). Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

### Pollock

According to de Kooning, it was **Jackson Pollock** (1912–56), with the radical "drip" paintings he began to make in the late forties, who "broke the ice." Hailing from the West, Pollock became a huge force on the New York art scene, living hard, drinking hard, and then dying violently in a car accident at a young age. He achieved a

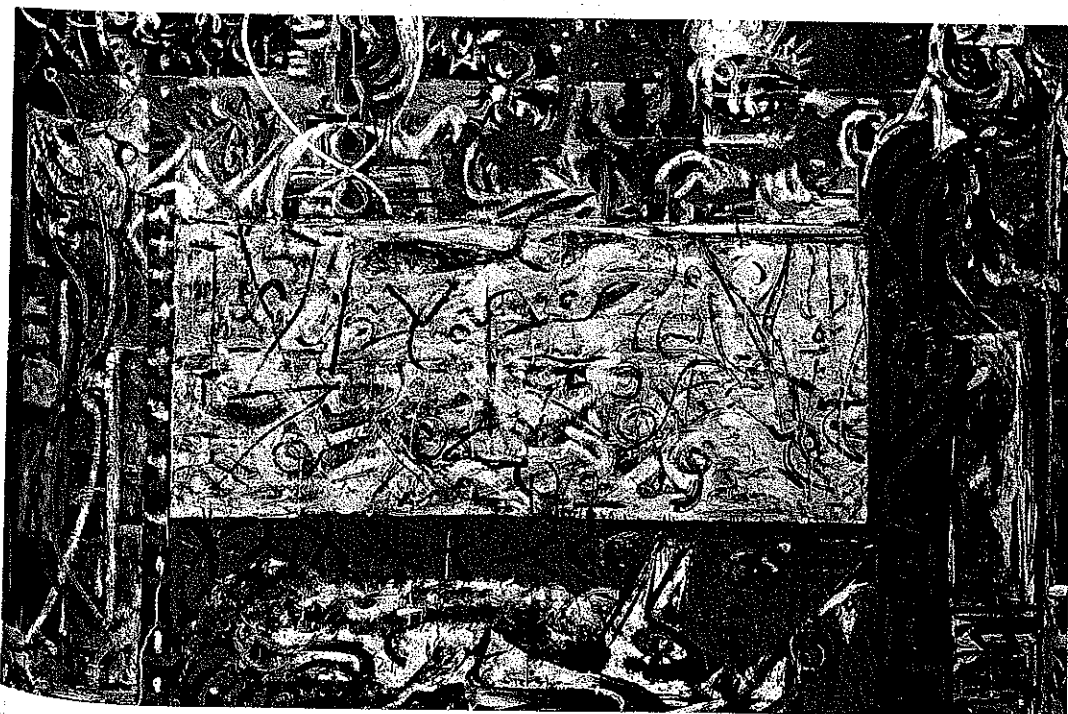


**19.8** Willem de Kooning, *Pirate (Untitled III)*, 1981. Oil on canvas, 7'4" × 6'4½" (2.2 × 1.9 m). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

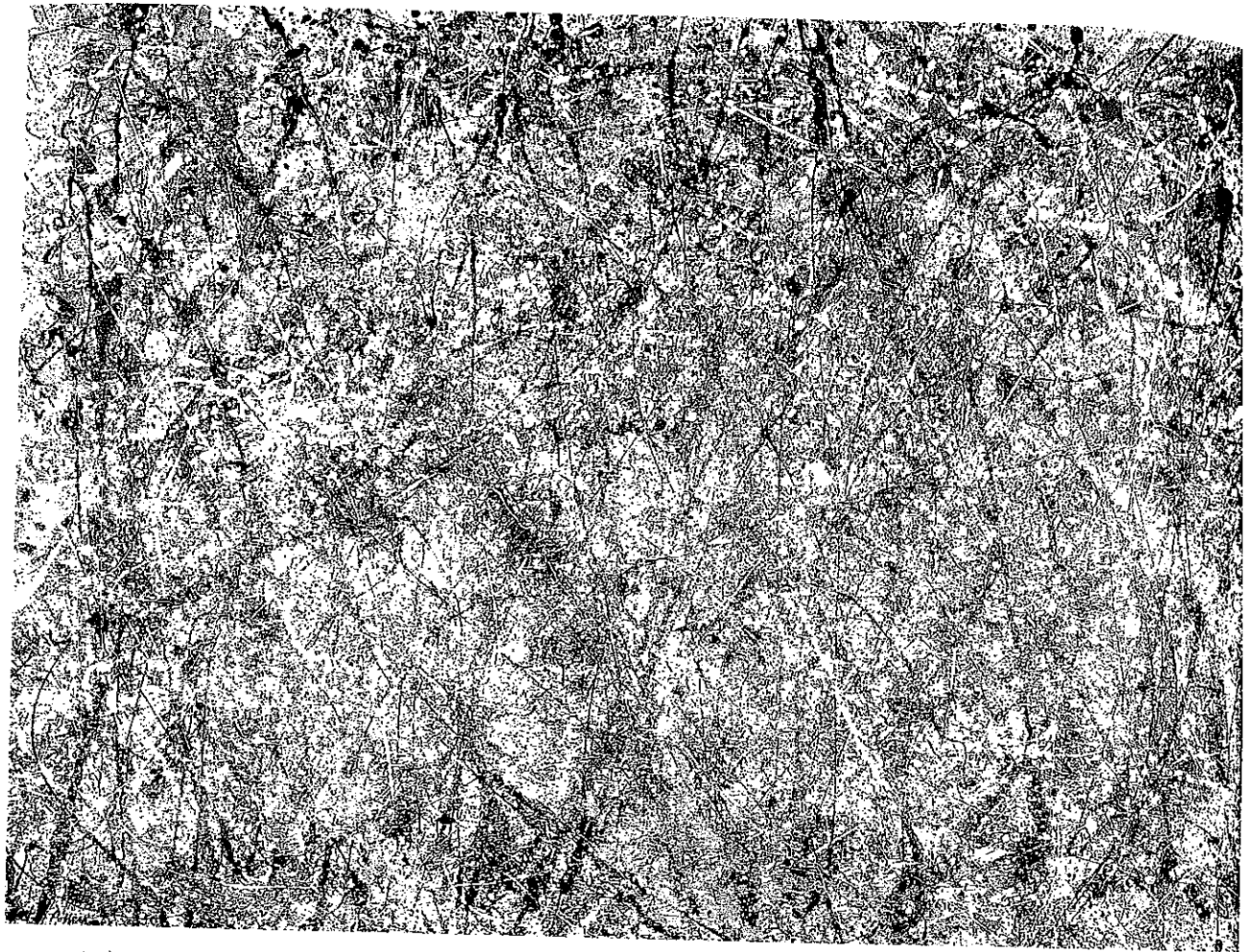
Art Students League with Thomas Hart Benton (see fig. 18.32), who represented, Pollock said, "something against which to react very strongly, later on." Nevertheless, there is a relation between Pollock's abstract arabesques and Benton's rhythmic figurative patterns. The landscapes of Ryder (see fig. 2.53) as well as the work of the Mexican muralists (see figs. 18.55, 18.57) were important sources for Pollock's violently expressive early paintings, as were the automatic methods of Masson and Miró. In 1939 The Museum of Modern Art mounted a large Picasso exhibition, a catalytic event for artists like de Kooning and Pollock, who were then struggling to come to terms with his work, learn from his example, and forge their own independent styles out of Cubism.

Pollock's paintings of the mid-forties, usually involving some degree of actual or implied figuration, were coarse and heavy, suggestive of Picasso, but filled with a nervous, brutal energy all their own. In *Guardians of the Secret*, 1943 (fig. 19.9), schematic figures stand ceremonially at either end of a large rectangle, perhaps a table, an altar, or a funeral bier. A watchdog, with possible affinities to Tamayo's animals (see fig. 18.60), reclines below. Pollock, who covered his canvas with calligraphic, cryptic marks like some private hieroglyphic language, apparently began with legible forms that he gradually obscured. As he later told

stature of mythic proportions. By the fifties, he was an international symbol of the new American painting and remains an icon of the post-World War II artist. Pollock came to New York from Cody, Wyoming, by way of Arizona and California. Until 1932 he studied at the



**19.9** Jackson Pollock, *Guardians of the Secret*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 4¾" × 6'3" (1.2 × 1.9 m). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Albert M. Bender Collection, Albert M. Bender Bequest Fund Purchase.



**19.10** Jackson Pollock, *Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)*, 1950. Oil, enamel, and aluminum on canvas, 7'4" × 9'11" (2.2 × 3 m). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

his wife, the painter Lee Krasner, "I chose to veil the imagery." That imagery has been analyzed within the broad spectrum of Pollock's visual interests, including ritual Navaho sand painting, African sculpture, prehistoric art, and Egyptian painting. Some have seen evidence of Jungian themes in the powerfully psychic content of the artist's early work. Carl Jung's theories of the collective unconscious as a repository for ancient myths and universal archetypes were a frequent topic of discussion in Abstract Expressionist circles. Pollock underwent psychoanalysis with Jungian analysts beginning in 1939.

By 1947 Pollock had begun to experiment with allover painting, a labyrinthine network of lines, splatters, and paint drips from which emerged the great "drip" or "poured" paintings of the next few years. *Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)* (fig. 19.10) is one of his most beautiful drip paintings, with its intricate web of oil colors mixed with black enamel and aluminum paint. One can trace the movements of the artist's arm, swift and assured, as he deployed sticks or dried-out brushes to drip paint onto the surface. His lines are divorced from any descriptive function and range from stringlike thinness to coagulated puddles, all merging into a hazy, luminous whole that seems to hover above the picture plane rather than illusionistically

behind it. These paintings, generally executed on a large canvas laid out on the floor, are popularly associated with so-called action painting. It was never the intention of the critic Harold Rosenberg, in coining this term, to imply that action painting was limited to a kind of athletic exercise, but rather that the process of painting was as important as the completed picture. Despite the furious and seemingly haphazard nature of his methods, Pollock's painting was not a completely uncontrolled, intuitive act. There is no question that, in his paintings and those of other Abstract Expressionists, the elements of intuition and accident play a large and deliberate part—this was indeed one of the principal contributions of Abstract Expressionism, which had found its own inspiration in Surrealism's psychic automatism. At the same time, however, Pollock's works are informed by skills honed by years of practice and reflection, just as the improvisatory talents of jazz musicians are paradoxically enhanced by regimented training.

Pollock's spun-out skeins of poured pigment contributed other elements that changed the course of modern painting. There was, first, the concept of the allover painting where no part of the composition is given formal precedence over another; it is nonhierarchical, with zones of pictorial interest evenly distributed over the surface. This

“holism,” together with the large scale of the works, introduced another concept—that of wall painting different from the tradition of easel painting. In 1946 Pollock, who had worked on mural projects for the WPA, said he wanted to paint pictures that “function between the easel and the mural.” As scholar Elizabeth Frank has written, “Over the next three years, Pollock made great art out of this ‘halfway state,’ preserving the tension between the easel picture, with its capacity to draw the viewer into a fictive world, and the mural, or wall picture, with its power to inhabit the viewer’s own space.” This was the final break from the Renaissance idea of painting detached from spectator, to be looked at as a self-contained unit. The painting became an environment that encompassed the spectator. The feeling of absorption or participation is heightened by the ambi-

guity of the picture space. The colors and lines, although never puncturing deep perspective holes in the surface, still create a sense of continuous movement, a billowing, a surging back and forth, within a limited depth. Pollock referred to being “in” his paintings when he worked, and in *No. 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)* tracks of his literal presence are recorded in his own handprints, especially at the upper left edge. In 1950, partly to dispel his image in the popular press as a mad artist senselessly flinging paint at the canvas, Pollock allowed photographer Hans Namuth to film him at work at his Long Island studio. The result is an invaluable document of the artist’s methods, which embraced both spontaneity and premeditation, control and exhilarating freedom (fig. 19.11). In many ways, Pollock departed from the tradition of Renaissance and modern painting before him, and although he had no direct stylistic followers, he significantly affected the course of experimental painting after him.

Pollock experienced a period of crisis and doubt in the wake of the success of his drip paintings, and in late 1950 he began to reexplore problems of the figure in several drawings and paintings, predominantly using black. Between 1953 and 1956 he returned to traditional brush painting, sometimes heavy in impasto, and involving images reminiscent of paintings of the early forties. In the magisterial *Portrait and a Dream*, 1953 (fig. 19.12), he constructed a visual dialogue between the two modes. At the left he dripped black paint in abstracted patterns that vaguely suggest human anatomies. At the right, in what many have read as a self-portrait, he resorted to overt figuration with brush-applied color. It is as if the figure lies latent within his webs of paint and, with a few adjustments of his arm, those webs could call up an image. “When you’re painting out of your unconscious,” Pollock said, “figures are bound to emerge.” These later works suffered in critical opinion when compared to the drip paintings—



19.11 Jackson Pollock at work in his Long Island studio, 1950.



19.12 Jackson Pollock, *Portrait and a Dream*, 1953. Enamel on canvas, 4'10" × 11'2½" (1.48 × 3.4 m). Dallas Museum of Art.





**19.13** Lee Krasner, *Polar Stampede*, 1960. Oil on cotton duck, 7'9" × 13'3¼" (2.4 × 4 m). Collection Pollock Krasner Foundation.

even some of Pollock's strongest supporters saw them as a retreat. The black-and-white canvases and the paintings that followed suggest a new phase of signal importance, unfortunately terminated by the artist's premature death in 1956.

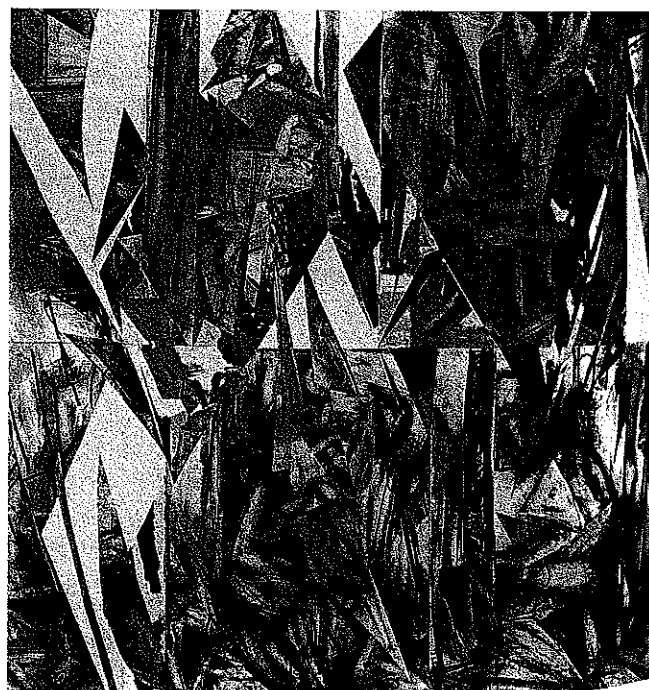
### Krasner

Brooklyn-born Lee Krasner (1908–84) received academic training at several New York art schools before joining the Mural Division of the WPA in 1935. From 1937 to 1940 she was a student of Hans Hofmann, from whom she said she "learned the rudiments of Cubism." Subsequently, she joined the AAA, devoted to nonobjective art in the tradition of Mondrian, and exhibited Cubist abstractions in their group shows. Krasner became acquainted with Pollock in 1942, when John Graham included their work in a show of young artists he felt showed promise. Krasner and Pollock began to share a studio in 1942, married in 1945, and relocated to Long Island. Unlike Pollock, Krasner felt a general antipathy toward the Surrealists and their automatic methods, due in part, as art historian Barbara Rose has shown, to the fundamentally misogynist attitudes of the European Surrealist emigrés (compounded by the general marginalization of women within Abstract Expressionist circles). Throughout the forties and fifties, working in the presence of Pollock's forceful personality, Krasner gradually moved away from Cubist-based forms to a concern for spontaneous gesture and large-scale all-over compositions, while remaining committed to a Mondrianesque sense of structure.

Between 1959 and 1962, following the traumas of Pollock's death as well as that of her mother, Krasner made a series of *Umbra* paintings, so-called for their predominantly brownish hues, which the artist once referred to as "colorless." In *Polar Stampede* (fig. 19.13) she approached the canvas with a loaded brush, allowing the medium to splash and explode across the canvas until it resembled a vast glacial landscape that has been stirred up, as the title

suggests, by the pounding hooves of wild animals. Krasner did not allow herself improvisational freedom to the degree practiced by Pollock, for even in such a boldly gestural abstraction, her strokes have a regular, rhythmical beat, and a sense of imposed structure.

Krasner had employed the collage medium throughout her career. In 1976 she cut up her own drawings and paintings—Cubist works made while she was a Hofmann student—and assembled the sliced images into new compositions. The sharp cutout forms of *Imperative* (fig. 19.14) overlap and interpenetrate one another, ironically functioning like the Cubist shards in her original drawings. By mutilating her own past work, Krasner, always intensely



**19.14** Lee Krasner, *Imperative*, 1976. Oil, charcoal, and paper on canvas, 50 × 50" (127 × 127 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

self-critical, could reclaim it for another context and arrive at a powerful new synthesis.

### Kline

Franz Kline (1910–62) was as fascinated with the details and tempo of contemporary America as Stuart Davis (see fig. 18.64), but he was also deeply immersed in the tradition of Western painting, from Rembrandt to Goya. Born in the coal-mining region of Eastern Pennsylvania, Kline studied art at academies in Boston and London and, throughout the forties, painted figures and urban scenes tinged with Social Realism. A passion for drawing manifested itself during the forties, particularly in his habit of making little black-and-white sketches, fragments in which he studied single motifs, structure, or space relations. One day in 1949, according to the painter and critic Elaine de Kooning, Kline was looking at some of these sketches enlarged through an opaque projector and saw their implications as large-scale, free abstract images. Although this moment of revelation has no doubt been largely exaggerated, and although Kline's mastery of abstraction was gradual rather than instantaneous, he did formulate his new Abstract Expressionist vocabulary with astonishing speed. Even the first works in his new mode have nothing tentative about them.

In 1950, when he made his first large-scale black-and-white abstractions, Kline was well aware of the experiments of the pioneer Abstract Expressionists, although he never shared Pollock's interest in myth or Rothko's interest in the sublime, and he tended to gamble less with spontaneous gesture than his friend de Kooning. Instead he worked out his compositions in advance, with preliminary sketches, usually on pages torn from the telephone book. *Nijinsky* (fig. 19.15) is an abstract meditation on his own figurative representations of the same subject, based on a photograph of the great Russian dancer as Petrushka.

In later works such as *Mahoning* (fig. 19.16), named for a town in Pennsylvania, curved forms give way to straight, girderlike strokes that hurtle across the full breadth of the eight-and-a-half-foot (2.5 m) canvas. Using house-painter brushes on unstretched canvases tacked to his studio wall, Kline shaped rugged but controlled brushstrokes into powerful, architectural structures that have affinities with motifs in the industrial landscape he admired, such as trains, cranes, and bridges. In the paint texture as well as in the shaping of forms, there is an insistence on the equivalence of the whites that prevents the work from becoming simply a blown-up black drawing on a white ground, for, as Kline said, he also painted the white areas, sometimes on top of the black.

A number of artists in this period had pared their art down to the essentials of black and white. Both de Kooning and Pollock, as we have seen, renounced color for a time, as did Newman, Motherwell, Tomlin, and a number of other artists associated with the New York School. Kline reintroduced color to his compositions in the late

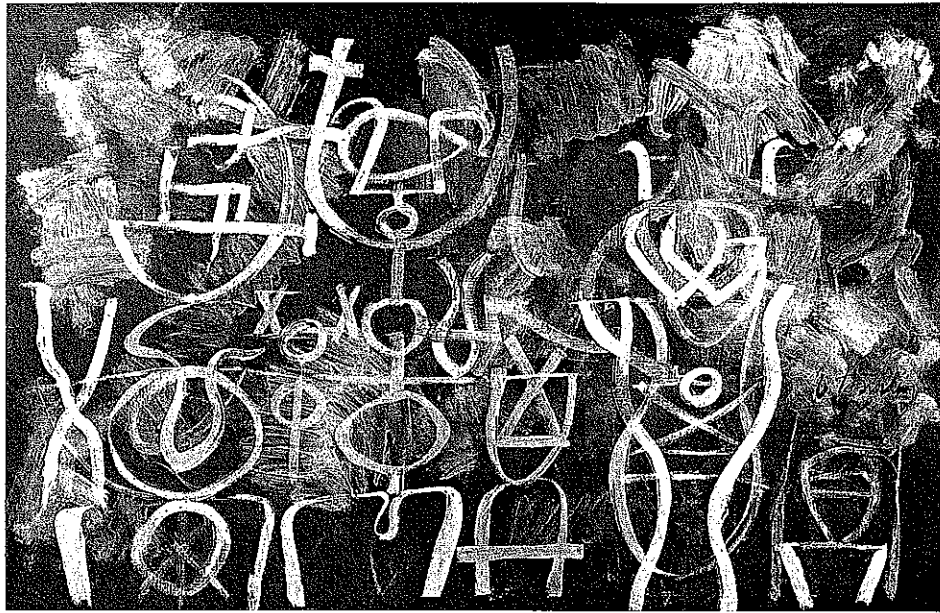


19.15 Franz Kline, *Nijinsky*, 1950. Enamel on canvas, 46 × 35½" (116.8 × 89.5 cm). Collection Muriel Kallis Newman, Chicago.

fifties but sadly died in the midst of these new experiments. Like de Kooning's, Kline's painted structures had an enormous impact on younger artists. Their art fostered a veritable school of gestural painters in the late fifties, the so-called second generation of Abstract Expressionists, the best of whom forged their own individual styles from the pioneers' examples.



19.16 Franz Kline, *Mahoning*, 1956. Oil on canvas, 6'8" × 8'4" (2 × 2.5 m). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



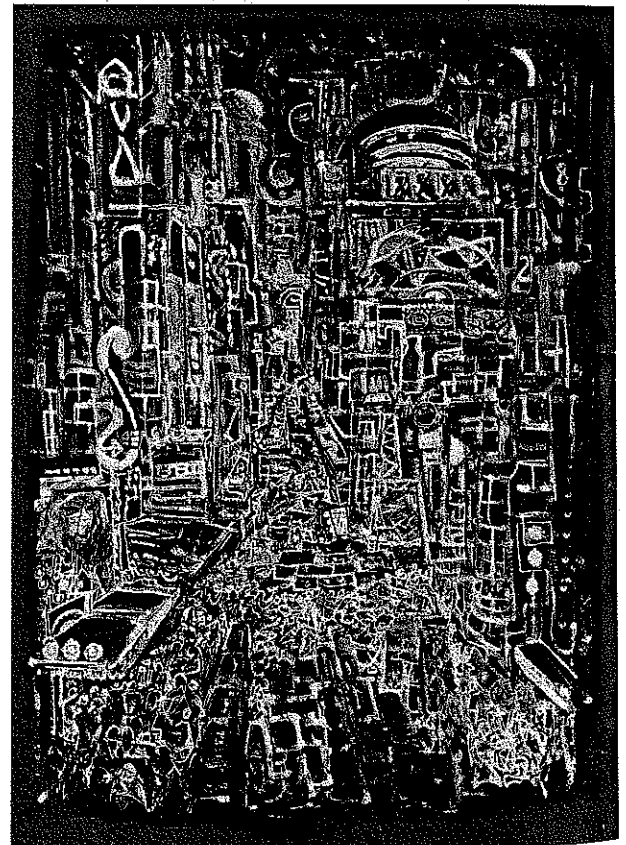
**19.17** Bradley Walker Tomlin, *All Souls Night*, 1947. Oil on canvas, 42½ × 64" (106.7 × 162.6 cm).

### Tomlin and Tobey

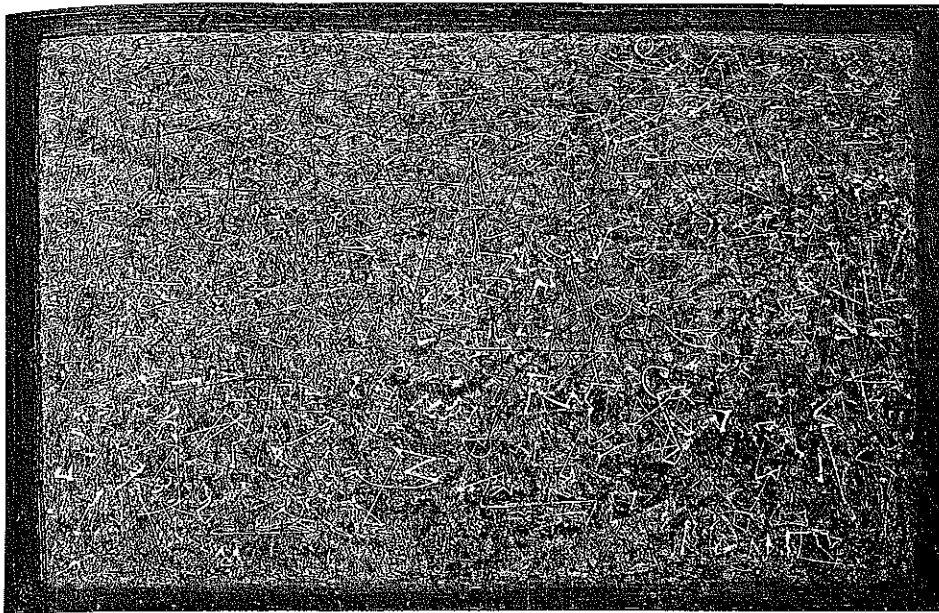
Until the mid-forties, **Bradley Walker Tomlin** (1899–1953) was one of the most sensitive and accomplished Americans working in an abstract Cubist style. Toward the end of the decade he completed a group of pictographic compositions related to those of Adolph Gottlieb, including *All Souls Night* (fig. 19.17), where he superimposed signs resembling ancient hieroglyphs over loosely brushed and delicately colored backgrounds. In 1948 he began to experiment with a form of free calligraphy, principally in black and white, which derived from his interest in automatism, Zen Buddhism, and Japanese brush painting. From this moment, Tomlin returned during the last three or four years of his life to painterly abstractions in which delicate and apparently spontaneous dabs of paint create shimmering, all-over compositions. In these so-called “petal paintings,” Tomlin discovered some of the lyricism and luminosity of Impressionist landscapes, but he subjected his strokes to the pictorial discipline of a loosely implied grid.

**Mark Tobey** (1890–1976) moved to Seattle from New York in 1922, and, though he worked far from the artistic mainstream, he produced a unique body of work in step with the most advanced tendencies in New York at that time. Tobey was drawn by a profound inner compulsion to a personal kind of abstract expression with strongly religious overtones. He was a convert to the Bahai faith, which, as he said, stresses “the unity of the world and the oneness of mankind.” He began studying Chinese brush painting in 1923 and in the thirties studied Zen Buddhism in China and Japan. In *Broadway* (fig. 19.18) Tobey applied the lessons of calligraphy to communicate his vivid memories of New York. His animated line, with its intricate, jazzy rhythms—he called it “white writing”—captures the lights, noise, and frenetic tempo of the city. Like de Kooning or Pollock, Tobey moved between figurative and abstract modes throughout the forties. In his best-known pictures, such as *Universal Field* (fig. 19.19),

the “white writing” becomes a kind of nonreferential calligraphy that is a small-scale, wrist-painted version of the broader, arm-gestured, all-over surfaces poured by Pollock. Tobey, who actually composed paintings from linear arabesques and fluid color before Pollock’s all-over drip paintings, here creates a field charged with energy and light, as his drawn lines zip and dart through a shallow, electrified space.



**19.18** Mark Tobey, *Broadway*, c. 1935. Tempera on Masonite, 26 × 19¼" (66 × 48.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



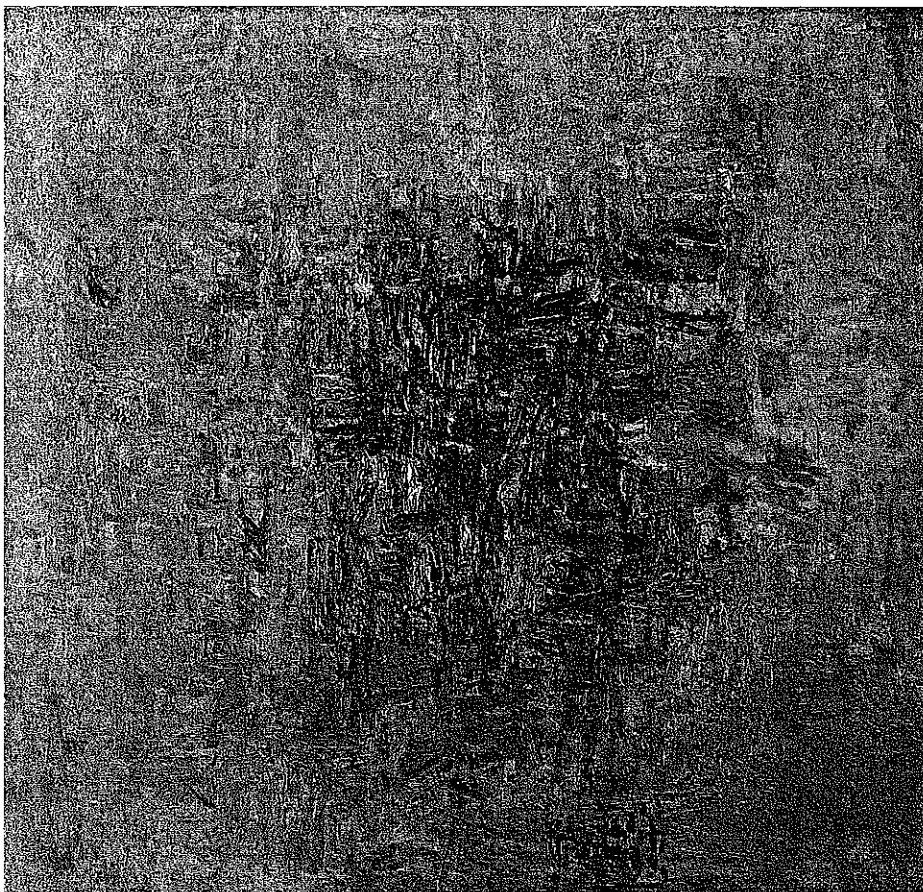
**19.19** Mark Tobey,  
*Universal Field*, 1949.  
Pastel and tempera on  
cardboard, 28 × 44"  
(73.9 × 116.2 cm).  
Whitney Museum of  
American Art, New York.

### Guston

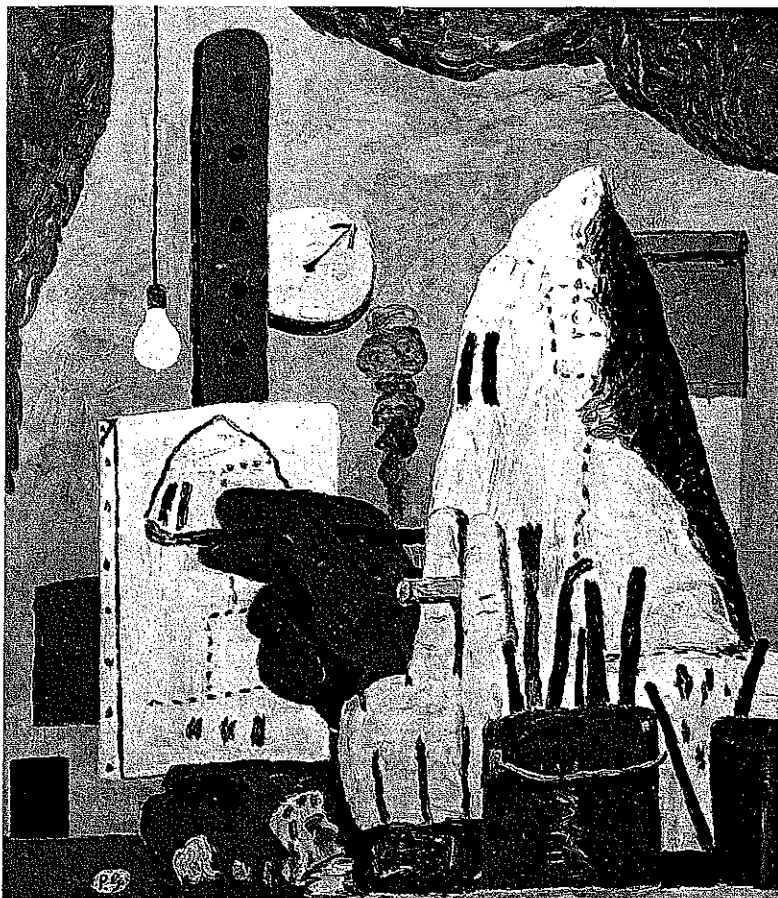
**Philip Guston** (1913–80) was expelled from Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles along with his classmate Jackson Pollock for lampooning the conservative English department in their own broadside. Pollock was readmitted, but Guston set off on his own, working at odd jobs, attending art school briefly as well as meetings of the Marxist John Reed Club. He followed Pollock to New York and, in 1936, signed up for the mural section of the WPA. By the mid-forties, drawing on his diverse studies of

Cubism, the Italian Renaissance, and the paintings of de Chirico and Beckmann, Guston was painting mysterious scenes of figures in compressed spaces, works that earned him a national reputation.

Guston taught painting for a time in Iowa City and St. Louis and, in the late forties, began to experiment with loosely geometric abstractions. After many painful intervals of doubt, he made his first abstract gestural paintings in 1951. These contained densely woven networks of short strokes in vertical and horizontal configurations (fig. 19.20)



**19.20** Philip Guston,  
*Zone*, 1953–54.  
Oil on canvas, 46 × 48"  
(116.8 × 122.2 cm).  
The Edward R. Broida Trust,  
Los Angeles.



19.21 Philip Guston, *Studio*, 1969. Oil on canvas, 48 × 42" (121.9 × 106.7 cm). Private collection.

Beckett, Guston composed haunting scenes in a characteristic palette of pink, black, and red. At first he invented narratives featuring ominous hooded figures, their ambiguous identity ranging from marauding Ku Klux Klan members to the artist himself at his easel (fig. 19.21). In *Head and Bottle*, Guston envisioned himself as a grotesque, disembodied head, flushed and stubble-covered, but his one visible eye wide open. When they were shown in New York, Guston's figurative paintings were seen by many, including both former detractors and supporters, as a betrayal of abstraction and an acquiescence to current Pop trends. In many ways the full implications of Guston's powerfully moving late canvases were not realized until they provided the key inspiration for the New Image and Neo-Expressionist painters of the early seventies and eighties (see chapters 24 and 26).

that reveal an admiration for Mondrian. The heavy impasto, serene mood, and subtle, fluctuating light in his muted reds, pinks, and grays caused some to see these works as lyrical landscapes, earning Guston the label "Abstract Impressionist." But Guston, who had negligible interest in the Impressionists, explained, "I think of painting more in terms of the drama of this process than I do of 'natural forces.'"

Throughout the fifties, Guston employed larger and more emphatic gestures in his abstractions, with a tendency to concentrate centralized color masses within a light and fluid environment. In 1962 the Guggenheim Museum mounted a major Guston retrospective, as did New York's Jewish Museum in 1966. But despite these external successes, Guston was experiencing a crisis in his art, with concerns about abstraction's limited potential for expressing the full gamut of human experience. This came at a time when the New York artworld was undergoing a profound shift in mood, with young Pop artists and hard-edge abstractionists casting a critical eye over what they regarded as the emotional excesses of their artistic predecessors. In the late sixties, Guston returned to recognizable imagery, astonishing the artworld with intensely personal, sometimes nightmarish, images in a crude, cartoonish style. "I got sick and tired of all that purity," he said, "[I] wanted to tell stories." A gifted draftsman with a penchant for caricature as well as an abiding fondness for cartoons and, significantly, for the writing of Franz Kafka and Samuel

### Elaine de Kooning and Grace Hartigan

Elaine de Kooning (1918–89) is probably best known for the figurative paintings she made in the fifties. However, at her death a group of abstractions from the forties were discovered among her belongings that reveal her early experiments within an Abstract Expressionist mode. She spent the summer of 1948 at Black Mountain College in North Carolina with her husband, Willem de Kooning (they had married in 1943). At the invitation of Josef Albers, Willem had joined the distinguished faculty at the experimental school as a visiting artist. Elaine de Kooning always acknowledged the importance of her husband's paintings as well as those of their friend, Arshile Gorky, to her own work: "Their reverence and knowledge of their materials, their constant attention to art of the past and to everything around them simultaneously, established for me the whole level of consciousness as the way an artist should be." In *Untitled, Number 15*, painted during the summer of 1948, she set suggestive, biomorphic forms amidst more geometric shapes, recalling her husband's work of the same moment (see fig. 19.4). Following the summer at Black Mountain, de Kooning began to write on contemporary art for *ARTnews*. Her keen perceptions, as well as her vantage point as a practicing artist who knew her subject firsthand, endowed authority to her writing. In the fifties and sixties, de Kooning displayed expressive tendencies in a group of male portraits (including several of John F. Kennedy). Her portrayal of art critic Harold Rosenberg (fig. 19.22),



**19.22** Elaine de Kooning, *Harold Rosenberg #3*, 1956. Oil on canvas, 6'8" × 4'10½" (2 × 1.5 m). National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

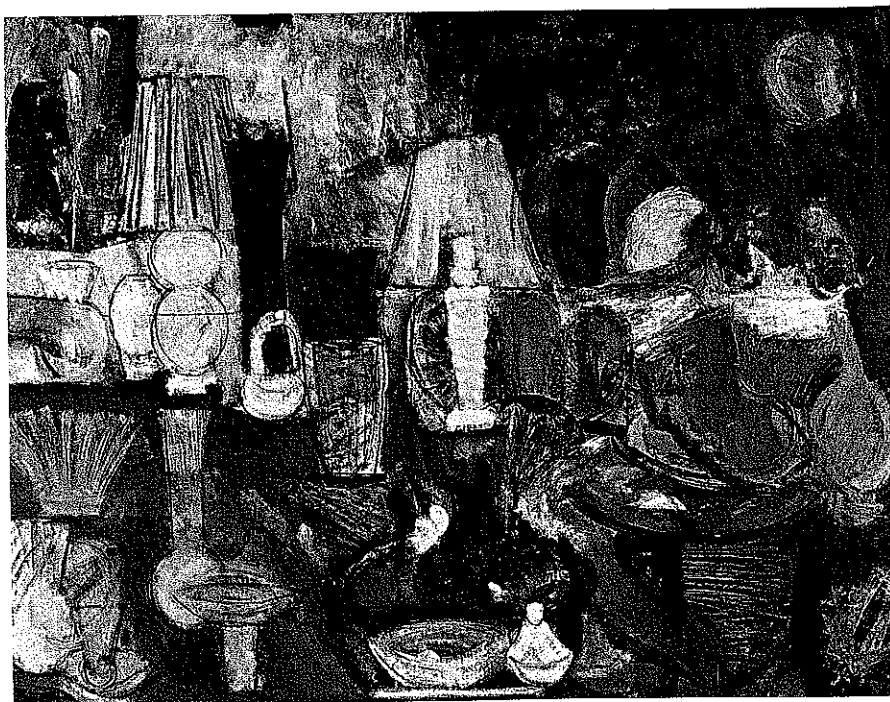
one of the champions of Abstract Expressionism, shows how she brought the gesturalism of the New York School to bear on figurative subjects.

Grace Hartigan (b. 1922) was an even younger member of the New York School than Elaine de Kooning, but one who also witnessed the critical artistic developments in New York at close range. A so-called second-generation Abstract Expressionist, Hartigan was deeply affected as a

young artist by her encounter with Pollock's drip paintings and Willem de Kooning's black-and-white paintings, both shown in New York in 1948. Like de Kooning, whose famous perambulations through downtown New York were fodder for his strident "urban landscapes" (see fig. 19.6), Hartigan found inspiration in the most mundane aspects of city life. In *Giftwares*, 1955 (fig. 19.23), she depicted the tawdry offerings of a storefront window, transforming them into a glowing still life in which the loosely brushed but legible forms are pulled up to the picture plane and dispersed evenly across the canvas. While Hartigan's rich palette is a kind of homage to Matisse, her homely subject matter prefigures work by artists of the sixties such as Claes Oldenburg (see fig. 21.25). In the late fifties, Hartigan embarked on a series of distinctive gestural abstractions before resuming a highly abstracted brand of figuration the following decade.

### Complex Simplicities: Color Field Painting

Although the divisions between gestural and Color Field painting are somewhat artificial, there were both formal and conceptual differences between artists such as Kline and de Kooning on the one hand and Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman on the other. In 1943 Rothko, Newman, and Adolph Gottlieb stated their purpose in a letter to *The New York Times*: "We favor the simple expression of the complex thought. We are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth." These artists fervently believed that abstract art was not "subjectless" and that,



**19.23** Grace Hartigan, *Giftwares*, 1955. Oil on canvas, 5'3" × 6'9" (1.6 × 2.1 m). Neuberger Museum of Art, College at Purchase, State University of New York.

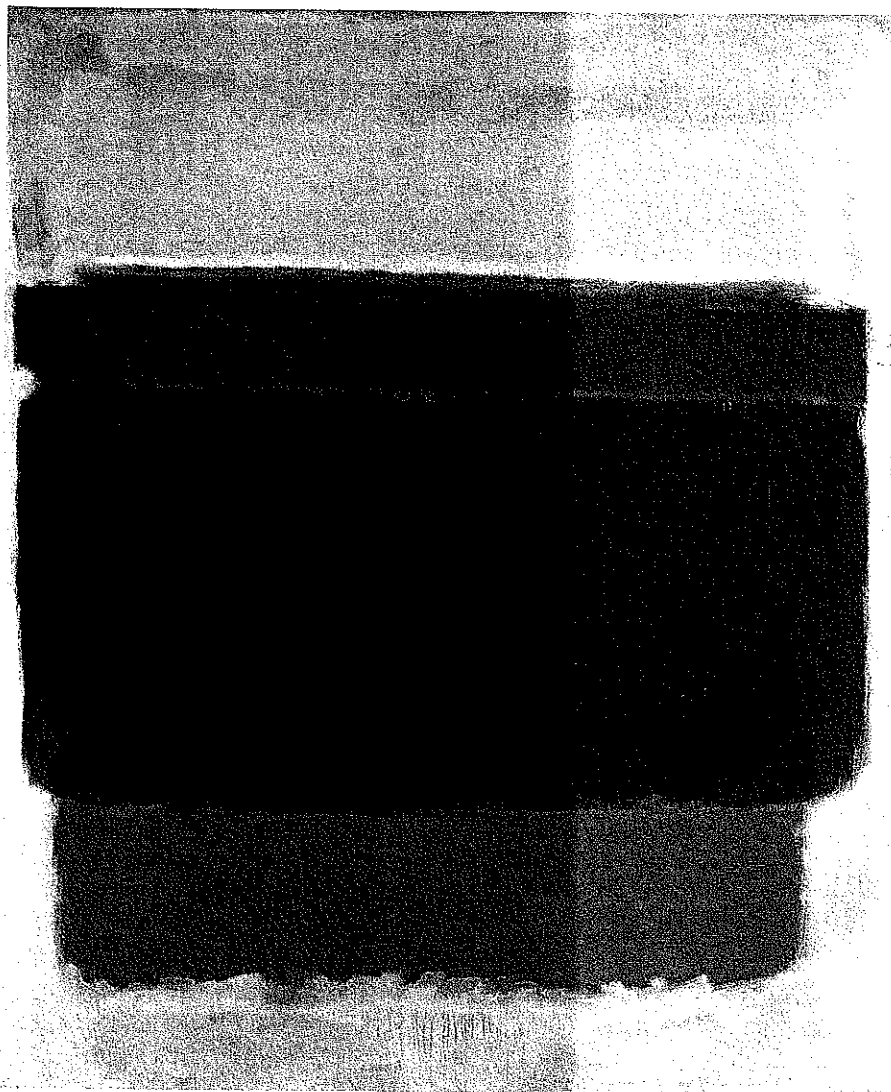
no matter how reductive, it could communicate the most profound subjects and elicit a deep emotional response in the viewer. In their search for universal subject matter, for "symbols," as Rothko said, "of man's primitive fears and motivations," the artists looked to many sources, including Jungian theory, Surrealist practice, and the art of non-European societies.

### Rothko

Mark Rothko (1903–70) emigrated to the United States with his Russian-Jewish family in 1913 and moved ten years later to New York, where he studied with Max Weber at the Art Students League. Throughout the thirties he made figurative paintings on mostly urban themes and in 1935 formed an independent artists' group with Gottlieb called "The Ten." In 1940, in search of more profound and universal themes and impressed by his readings of Nietzsche and Jung, Rothko began to engage with ancient myths as a source of "eternal symbols." In their letter to *The New York Times*, Rothko, Newman, and Gottlieb proclaimed their "spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art." Rothko first made compositions based on



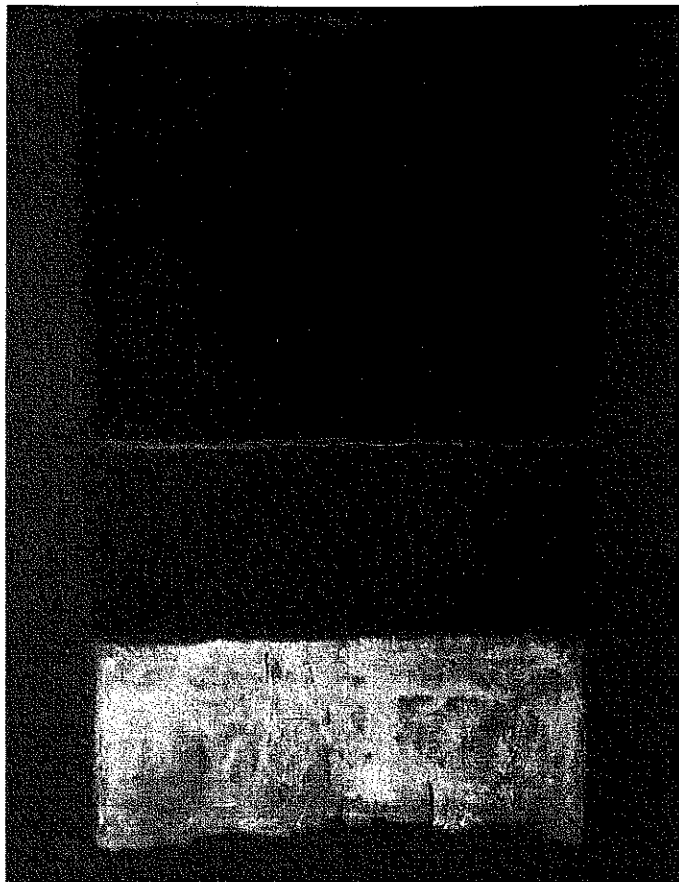
**19.24** Mark Rothko, *No. 18*, 1948. Oil on canvas, 67 $\frac{1}{2}$  × 55 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (170.8 × 141.9 cm). Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Poughkeepsie, New York.



**19.25** Mark Rothko, *Untitled (Rothko number 5068.49)*, 1949. Oil on canvas, 6'9 $\frac{1}{2}$ " × 5'6 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (2.1 × 1.7 m). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

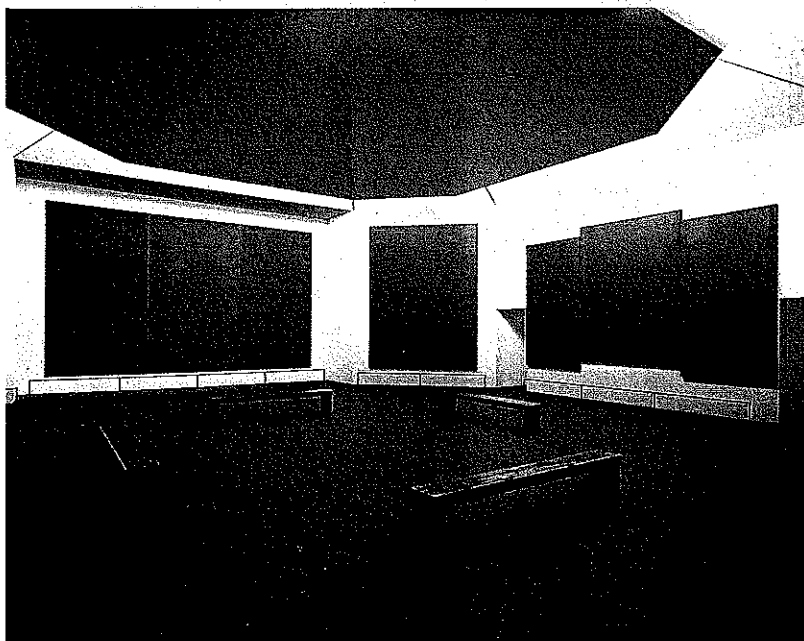
classical myths and then, by the mid-forties, painted biomorphic, Surrealist-inspired, hybrid creatures floating in primordial waters. These forms began to coalesce at the end of the decade into floating color shapes with loose, undefined edges within larger expanses of color (fig. 19.24). By 1949 Rothko had refined and simplified his shapes to the point where they consisted of color rectangles floating on a color ground (fig. 19.25). He applied thin washes of oil paint that contain considerable tonal variation and blurred the edges of the rectangles to create luminous color effects and a shifting, ambiguous space. Over the next twenty years, Rothko explored this basic compositional type with infinite and subtle variation. By the sheer sensuousness of their color areas and the sense of indefinite outward expansion without any central focus, the paintings are designed to absorb and engulf the spectator. Eventually, Rothko was painting on a huge scale, something that contributed to the effect of enclosing, encompassing color.

At the end of the fifties, Rothko began to move away from bright, sensuous color toward deeper, more somber hues (fig. 19.26). By the late sixties, the mood of his work had darkened still further, expressing his conviction that, even at its most abstract, art could convey a sense of "tragedy, ecstasy, and doom." He received commissions for large public spaces, including a restaurant in the Seagram Building in New York; at Harvard University; and in a chapel in Houston, Texas (fig. 19.27). The latter series consists of fourteen large panels, almost uniform in their deep black and red-brown, almost filling the entire space of available walls. The canvases are designed to be homogenous with the octagonal building (designed by Philip Johnson) and the changing light of the chapel interior. Thus, the forms have a less amorphous, harder-edge appearance than Rothko's earlier abstractions. They



**19.26** Mark Rothko, *White and Greens in Blue*, 1957. Oil on canvas, 8'4" × 6'10" (2.5 × 2.1 m). Private collection.

represent a total architectural-pictorial experience in a sense analogous to that attempted by the religious muralists of the Baroque seventeenth century. Rothko, who even adopted the triptych format long associated with religious subjects, never intended his abstractions as mere formal



**19.27** Mark Rothko, North, Northeast, and East wall paintings in the Rothko Chapel, Houston, Texas, 1965-66 (opened in 1971). Oil on canvas.



experiments, but rather wanted to provoke emotional and even transcendental experiences for the viewer.

### Newman

Like Rothko, Barnett Newman (1905–70) studied at the Art Students League in the twenties, but his artistic career did not begin in earnest until 1944, when he resumed painting after a long hiatus and after he had destroyed his early work. By the mid-fifties, he had received nowhere near the attention that Pollock, de Kooning, or Rothko had attracted, although it could be argued that, in the end, his work had the greatest impact on future generations. His mature work differed from that of other Abstract Expressionists (except Ad Reinhardt's) in its radical reductiveness and its denial of painterly surface. As the group's most thoughtful and most polemical theorist, Newman produced an important body of critical writing on the work of his contemporaries as well as subjects such as pre-Columbian art.

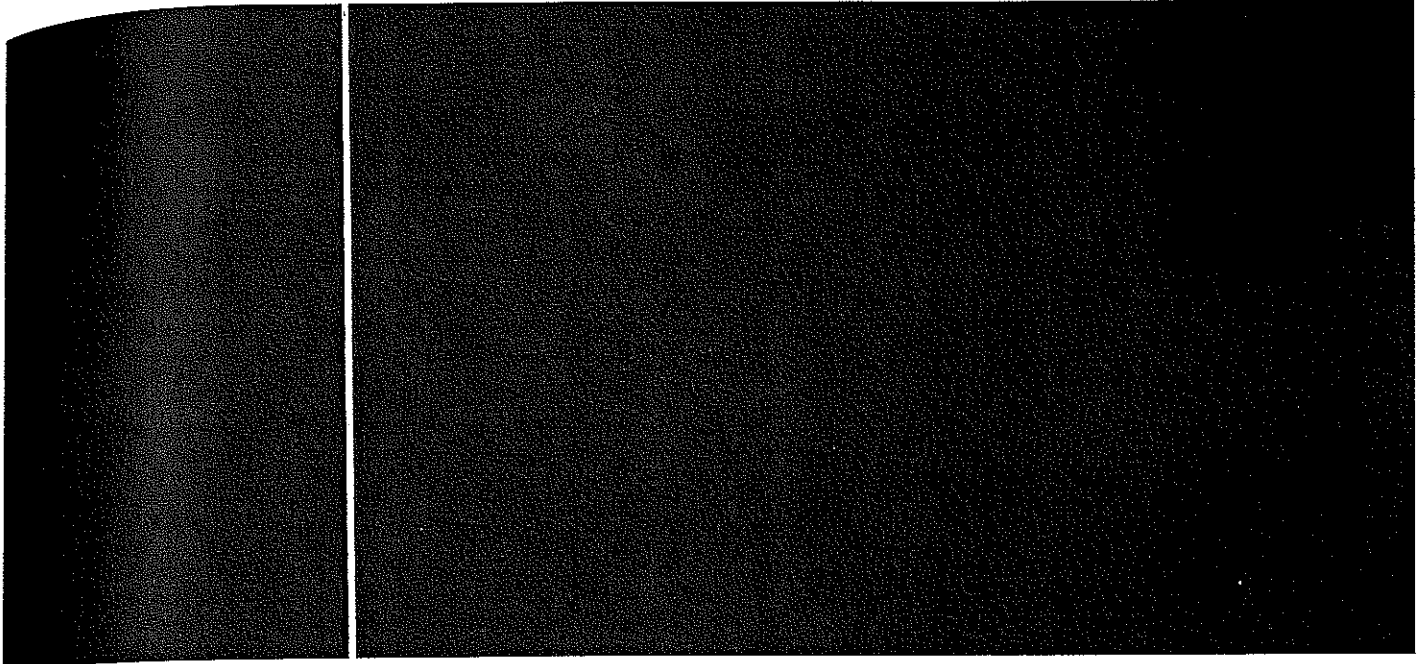
In his early mythic paintings Newman, who had studied botany and ornithology, explored cosmic themes of birth and creation, of primal forms taking shape. Those works share many traits with Rothko's biomorphic paintings. By 1946, however, in canvases such as *Genesis—The Break* (fig. 19.28), the forms become more abstract and begin to shed their biological associations, although the round shape here is a recurring seed form. Thomas Hess, a leading champion of the Abstract Expressionists, said that this painting (as the title implies) was about "the division between heaven and earth." In 1948 Newman made

*Onement I*, which he regarded as the breakthrough picture that established his basic formula—a unified color field interrupted by a vertical line—a "Zip" as he called it—or, rather, a narrow, vertical contrasting color space that runs the length of the canvas. The nature of the Zip varied widely, from irregular hand-brushed bands to uninflected, straight edges made possible with the use of masking tape, but the impression is usually of an opening in the picture plane rather than simply a line on the surface. While Newman did not seek out the atmospheric effects that Rothko achieved in his mature works, he was capable of brushed surfaces of tremendous beauty and nuance.

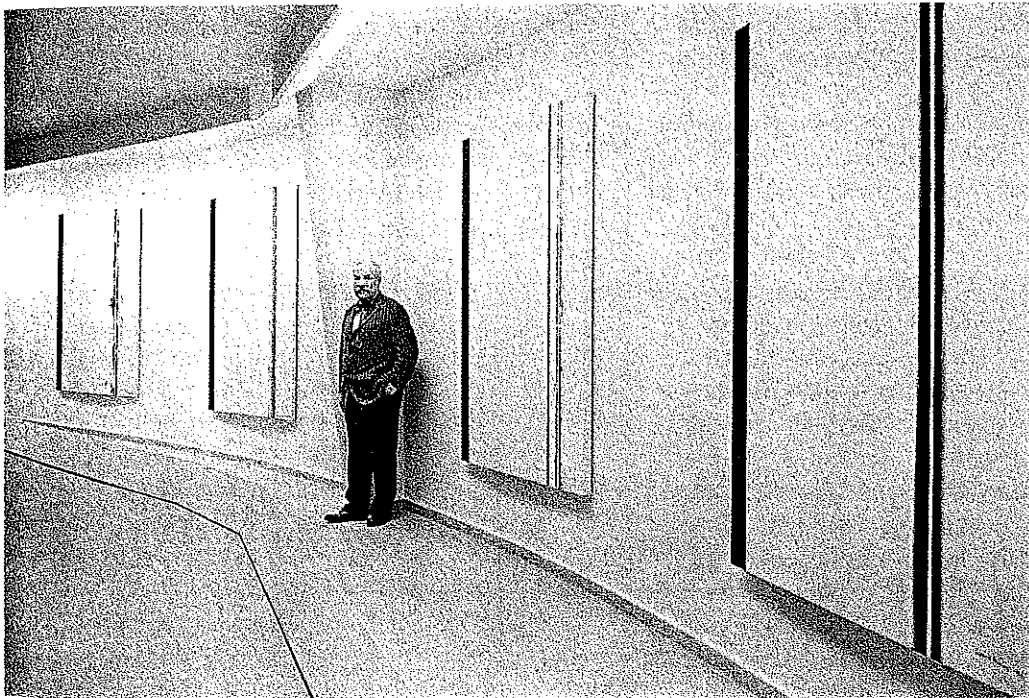
*Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (fig. 19.29) is a mature, mural-size painting where the multiple Zips differ in hue and value, sometimes in stark contrast to the brilliant monochrome field, sometimes barely distinguishable from it. Newman wanted to maintain a human scale for his essentially life-affirming, humanist art. Indeed, his title for this work means "Heroic Sublime Man," and his ubiquitous Zip has been read as a sign for the upright human being. Between 1958 and 1964, Newman painted a series of fourteen canvases on the Passion of Christ called *The Stations of the Cross—Lema Sabachthani*, the first four of which are shown in figure 19.30 with Newman at the Guggenheim Museum. He orchestrated his Zip across the series, restricting himself to black and white on unprimed canvas, but varying his medium (Magna, oil, and acrylic) as well as the thickness and character of his Zips. Newman said that the theme of the series was "the unanswerable question of human suffering," underscored by Jesus's



**19.28** Barnett Newman, *Genesis—The Break*, 1946. Oil on canvas, 24 × 27" (61 × 68.6 cm). Collection DIA Center for the Arts, New York.



**19.29** Barnett Newman, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, 1950–51. Oil on canvas, 7'11½" × 17'9¼" (2.4 × 5.1 m). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

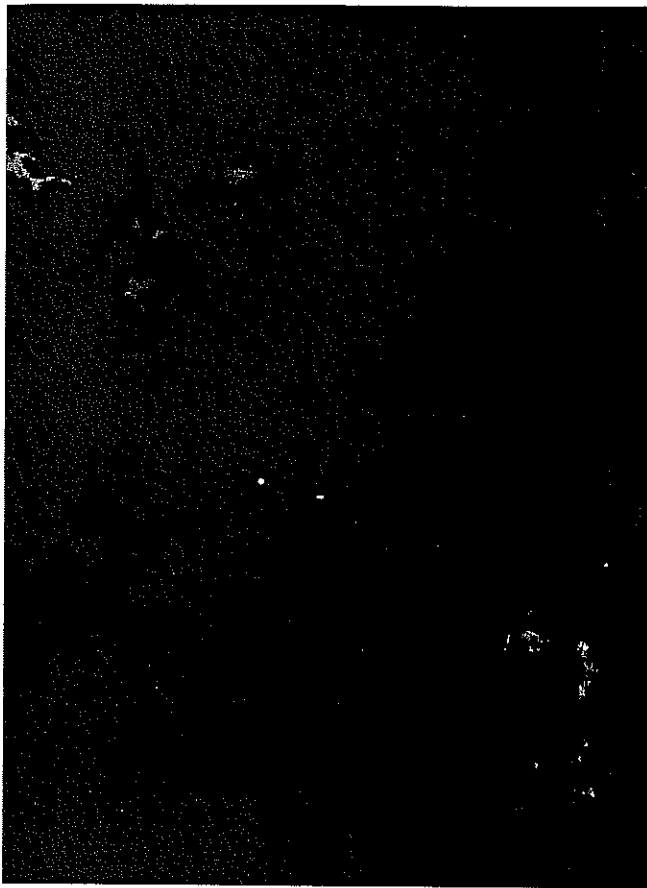


**19.30** Barnett Newman in front of *The Stations of the Cross* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, April 1966. Now at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

words on the cross in the Hebrew subtitle, meaning "Why did you forsake me?"

**Still**  
 Clyfford Still (1904–80), who grew up in Washington state and Alberta, Canada, differed from the other Abstract Expressionists in that virtually all of his training and early artistic development took place outside of New York City. He had, however, exhibited at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of

This Century beginning in 1945, thanks to Rothko, and at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1947. In 1950 he moved to New York from San Francisco, where he had been teaching at the progressive California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute). He remained in New York until 1961, when he took up residence in the Maryland countryside. Fiercely proud and independent, notoriously controlling about his work, and generally contemptuous of the "art world," Still preferred to exhibit infrequently and



**19.31** Clifford Still, *Number 2*, 1949. Oil on canvas, 7'8" × 5'7" (2.3 × 1.7 m). Collection June Lang Davis, Medina, Washington.

live at a considerable distance from the nexus of the art establishment in New York.

Since the late thirties, Still had painted in a freely abstract manner (which contained some vestigial figuration) involving large, flowing images executed in heavy, even coarse, paint textures that he realized with brushes and palette knives. He repeatedly disavowed any interest in Surrealism or the "mythmaking" of his New York contemporaries and refused to give titles to his works (other than neutral letters or a date) to prevent any association with a specific subject. By 1947 he was working on a huge scale, sometimes eight by ten feet (2.4 × 3 m), with immense, crusty areas of color in a constant state of fluid though turgid movement (fig. 19.31). These abstractions have been described as awesome landscapes that combine the drama and vastness of the West—its mesas, canyons, and rivers—and the Romantic landscape imagery of Albert Pinkham Ryder (see fig. 2.53). Art historian Robert Rosenblum characterized the dramatic effect of Still's canvases as "abstract sublime." Although the artist resisted any direct association between his compositions and landscape, he once said his work reflected "man's struggle and fusion with nature." Over the next twenty years Still persisted in his basic image, a predominant color varying in value and shot through with brilliant or somber accents.

## Reinhardt

**Ad Reinhardt** (1913–67) was already painting geometric abstractions in the late thirties. He was a superb cartoonist and parodist, a mercilessly incisive writer, and a serious student of Oriental art. As he wrote in a prominent art magazine in 1962, he was for "art-as-art," elaborating that such art, necessarily abstract, has nothing to do with the issues of either daily life or existential doubt. "The one thing to say about art and life is that art is art and life is life. ... Art that is a matter of life and death is neither fine nor free," he wrote. Reinhardt regarded the talk of myth and tragedy among the Abstract Expressionists as histrionic nonsense and objected to any association of his art with the ideals of the group. After abstract experiments in the forties, Reinhardt began in the early fifties to simplify his palette to a single color. The first groups of such paintings were all red or all blue (fig. 19.32), and the final group, on which he worked for the rest of his life, was all black. One first observes these later paintings simply as monochrome fields. With time, however (and especially with the black paintings), there begins to emerge a second, inner image—a smaller rectangle, square, or central cross consisting of a



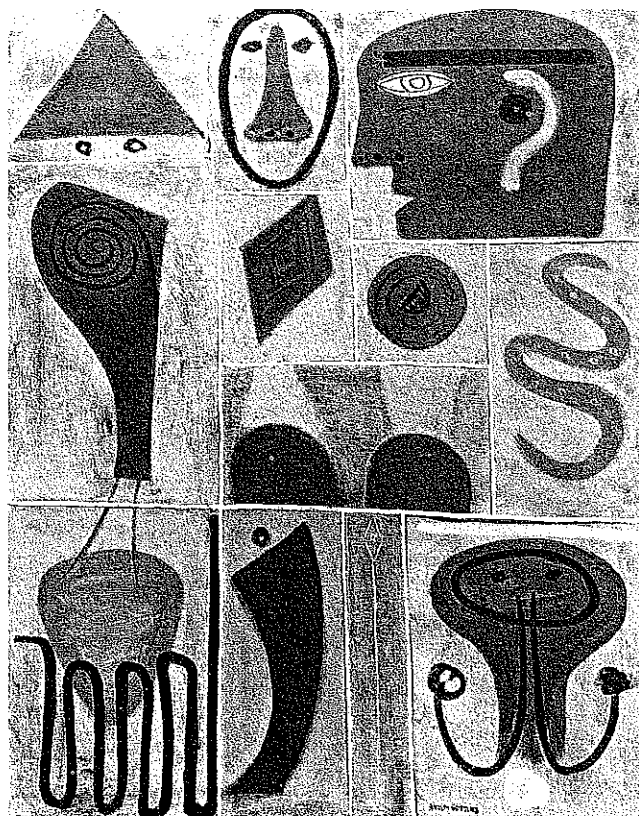
**19.32** Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting, Blue*, 1952. Oil on canvas, 6'3" × 2'4" (1.9 × 0.71 m). Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.

slightly different value or tone of the color, what art historian Yve-Alain Bois called “the fictive transformation of one color into two.” These paintings are static, symmetrical, and, according to the artist, timeless. They reward slow looking and are powerfully hypnotic in their effect. Although Reinhardt applied his colors with brushes, he did so without leaving the slightest trace of his implement on the surface. His stated purpose was the elimination of all associations, all extraneous elements, all symbols and signs, and the refinement of paintings to a single dominant experience. During the sixties and seventies, Reinhardt was much admired by Minimalist artists and became something of a cult figure among Conceptual artists, partly due to his writings and his extreme positions on the nature and function of the artist.

### Gottlieb

Born in New York City, Adolph Gottlieb (1903–74) studied at the Art Students League with John Sloan and Robert Henri (see fig. 18.1, 18.2). While visiting Europe in 1921–22, he became aware of European experiments in Cubism, abstraction, and expressionism. The friendships he formed with Rothko, Newman, and Milton Avery in the twenties were crucial for his future development. During a stay in Arizona during 1937–38, Gottlieb made a number of curious paintings of objects picked up from the desert and arranged within rectangular compartments. These anticipated the Pictographs, irregular painted grids filled with two-dimensional ideograms, which occupied the artist between 1941 and 1953 (fig. 19.33). Gottlieb composed his paintings intuitively, drawing on automatist methods as well as on his interest in ancient myth and ritual. The Pictographs—the term itself implies prehistoric cave paintings—had European sources, from Mondrian, Miró, and Klee, to the Cubist grids of Uruguayan artist Torres-García. However, it was also African and Native American art, notably that of the Northwest Coast Kwakiutl (Kwakwaka’waku) people, which provided Gottlieb with a powerful lexicon of mysterious signs that he assembled to form what he believed to be a new, universal language. Their ominous mood may reflect the dark realities of war, as Gottlieb himself seemed to suggest: “Today when our aspirations have been reduced to a desperate attempt to escape from evil ... our obsessive, subterranean, and pictographic images are the expression of the neurosis which is our reality.”

Gottlieb’s principal development of the late fifties and sixties was the series called *Bursts* (fig. 19.34), a sort of cosmic landscape usually consisting of an upper circular or ovoid element suggestive of a burning sun, below which is a broken, exploding element, open and dynamic in contrast with the closed form above. The *Burst* paintings combined aspects of gestural painting along with the expansive color of the Color Field painters. In general terms, the *Bursts* seem to underscore life’s fundamental dualities and conjure up landscapes at the dawn of civilization. More



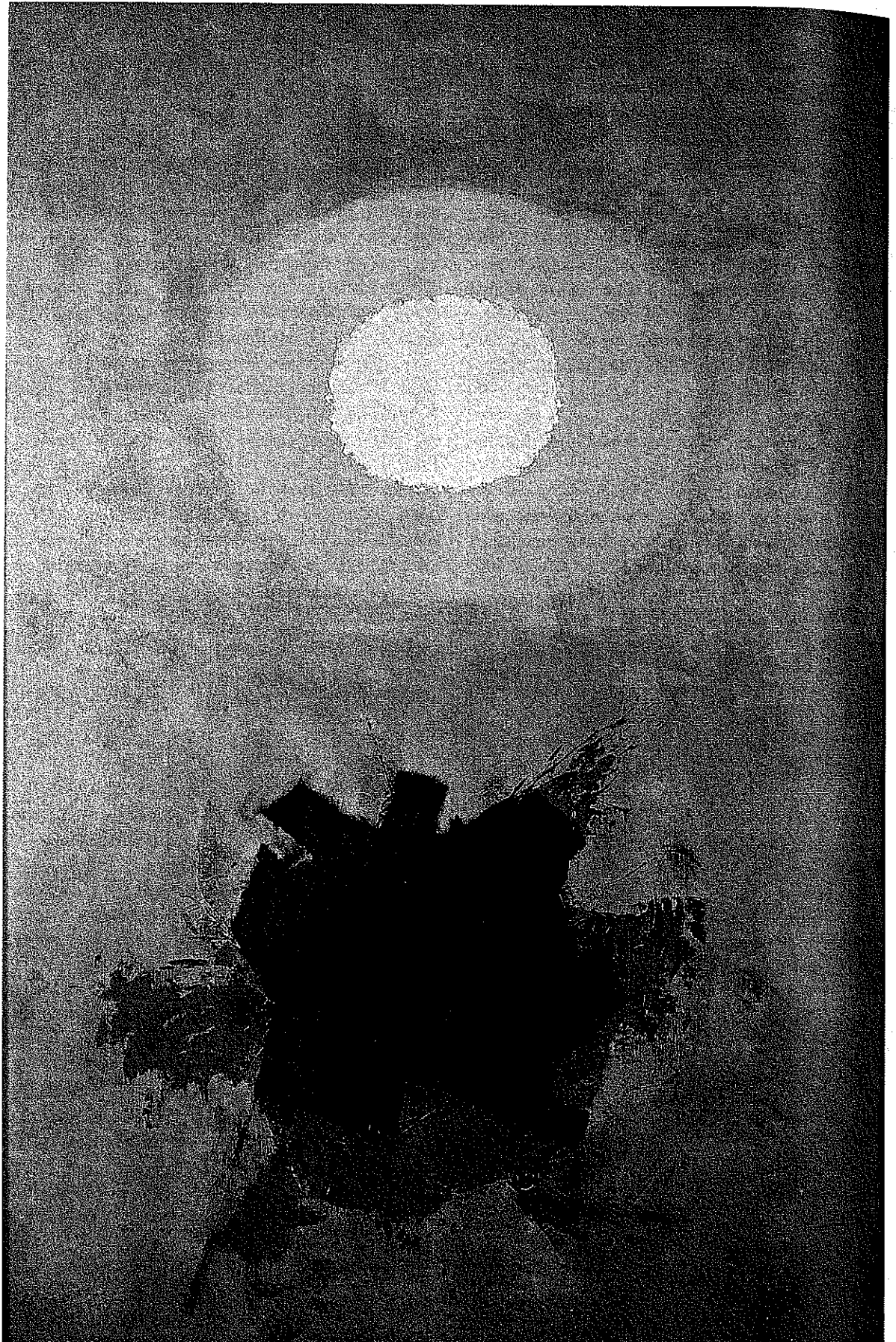
19.33 Adolph Gottlieb, *Voyager's Return*, 1946. Oil on canvas, 37 $\frac{1}{8}$  × 29 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (96.2 × 75.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

specifically, they carry the inescapable and recent memory of the atomic bombs dropped by America on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945.

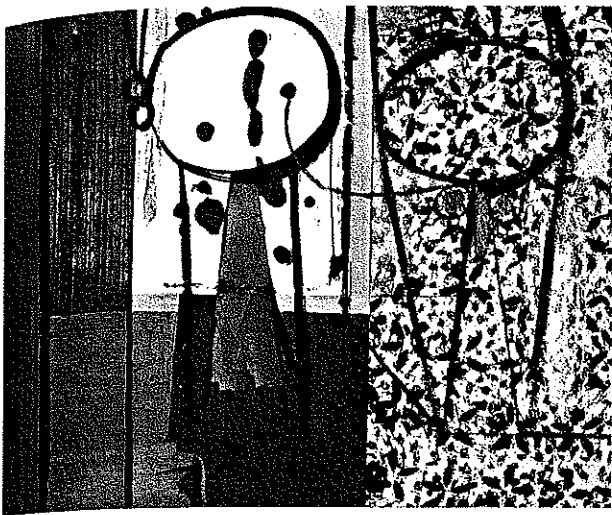
### Motherwell

Robert Motherwell (1915–91) was the youngest of the artists originally associated with Abstract Expressionism. He received his early training in literature, art history, and philosophy at Stanford, Harvard, and Columbia. Motherwell’s erudition made him an eloquent spokesman for Abstract Expressionism as well as a leading theorist of modern art. As a painter, he was largely self-trained, with the exception of some formal study as a young man in California and later with the Surrealist Kurt Seligmann in New York. In 1941 Motherwell made the acquaintance of several European Surrealists in New York, including Ernst, Tanguy, Masson, and Matta. The aspect of Surrealism that most intrigued him was automatism, the concept of the intuitive, the irrational, and the accidental in the creation of a work of art. In many ways, his early paintings represent an attempt to resolve the seeming contradictions between Mondrian (whom he had also met in New York) and the abstract Surrealists. Motherwell also provided American artists with their most thorough introduction to Dada in the 1951 collection *The Dada Painters and Poets*, still an essential sourcebook for Dada writing.

In 1943, at Matta’s suggestion, Motherwell began to experiment with collage, introducing automatist techniques in roughly torn pieces of paper. One of the earliest



**19.34** Adolph Gottlieb, *Orb* from the *Bursts* series, 1964. Oil on canvas, 7'6" × 5' (2.3 × 1.52 m). Dallas Museum of Art.



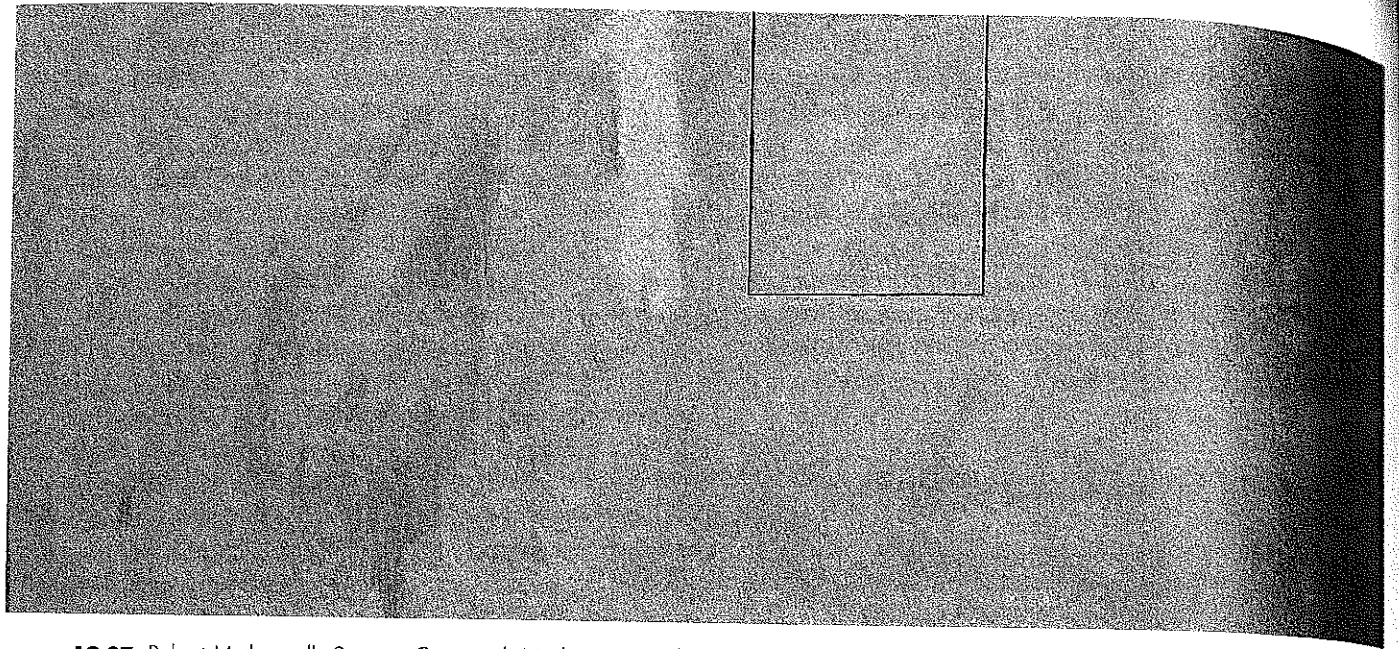
**19.35** Robert Motherwell, *Pancho Villa, Dead and Alive*, 1943. Gouache and oil with cut-and-pasted papers on cardboard, 28 × 35½" (71.7 × 91.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

**19.36** Robert Motherwell, *Elegy to the Spanish Republic No. 34*, 1953–54. Oil on canvas, 6'8" × 8'4" (2 × 2.5 m). Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York.

examples is *Pancho Villa, Dead and Alive*, 1943 (fig. 19.35). Motherwell, who had traveled to Mexico with Matta, had been struck by a photograph of the revolutionary figure, dead and covered with blood. The stick figures representing Villa relate directly to a painting by Picasso from the twenties, but other forms in the collage were to become signature Motherwell images, such as the ovoid shapes held in tension between vertical, architectural elements. Motherwell's involvement with the collage medium was more extensive than that of any of his Abstract Expressionist colleagues. In the many examples he continued to make throughout his career, he used postcards, posters, wine labels, or musical scores that constitute a visual day-by-day autobiography.

In 1948 Motherwell made the first work of his great series of abstract paintings entitled *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* (fig. 19.36), inspired by his profound reaction to the defeat of the Spanish Republic by fascist forces in early 1939. Until his death in 1991, he painted more than one hundred and fifty variants of the *Elegy* theme. These works stand in contrast to the brilliantly coloristic collages and paintings also created by the artist during the same period, for they were executed predominantly in stark black and white. "Black is death; white is life," the artist said. It is no





**19.37** Robert Motherwell, *Summer Open with Mediterranean Blue*, 1974. Acrylic on canvas, 4' × 9' (1.22 × 2.7 m). Collection Dedalus Foundation.

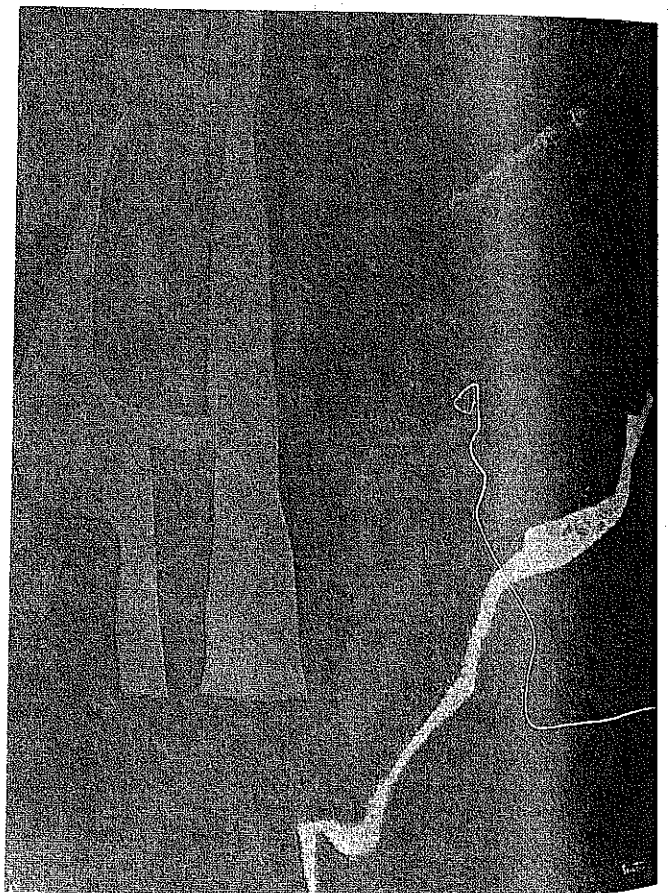
coincidence that Picasso's monumental painting of protest against the Spanish Civil War, *Guernica* (see fig. 15.46), was black, white, and gray. The *Elegies* consisted for the most part of a few large, simple forms, vertical rectangles holding ovoid shapes in suspension. The scale increased as the series progressed, with some works on a mural scale. While the loosely brushed, organic shapes have been read literally by some, who have suggested that they might represent male genitalia referring to Spanish bull fights, Motherwell said he invented the forms as emblems for universal tragedy.

In 1967 the artist began a second great series known as the *Opens* or "wall and window" paintings (fig. 19.37). Motherwell once said he would rather look at "parks or town squares with walls" than at "raw nature." "There is something in me," he wrote, "that responds to the stark beauty of dividing a flat solid plane." The *Opens* range from relatively uniform, although never flat, areas of color to large-scale exercises in rhythmic, variegated brushwork. There is always movement and light within the ground, as well as the so-called window motif common to these paintings. Although the *Open* series owed its inception partly to Motherwell's lifelong dialogue with the art of Matisse, and particularly to two of his starkly reductive compositions from 1914 involving views from windows, Motherwell's paintings also coincided with the significant emergence of Minimalist abstraction in New York.

### Baziotes

A friend of Motherwell and Matta from the early forties, **William Baziotes** (1912–63) explored with them aspects of Surrealist automatism and was respected enough by the European Surrealists to be included in their group shows in New York. Automatism for Baziotes was not a matter of

improvisational gesture, with all its implications of emotion and angst. Rather, it guided a slow and meditative process during which allusive, biomorphic forms emerged as the



**19.38** William Baziotes, *Dusk*, 1958. Oil on canvas, 60½ × 48¼" (153.4 × 122.6 cm). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

painting proceeded. Devoted to fantastic, mythic subject matter, Baziotes was a cofounder in 1948 of the Subjects of the Artist school, one of the intellectual meeting places of the New York School. His painting was characterized by shifting, fluid, diaphanous color into which were worked biomorphic shapes drawn with great sensitivity and suggestive of microcosmic or marine life. The strange forms in *Dusk* (fig. 19.38) may have something in common with prehistoric fossils, the kind the artist might have seen on one of his many visits to New York's American Museum of Natural History. Like a number of his fellow Abstract Expressionists, Baziotes was fascinated by paleontology and primitive life forms.

## Drawing in Steel: Constructed Sculpture

Constructed sculpture—as contrasted with sculpture cast in bronze or modeled in stone—and particularly welded metal sculpture, constituted a major direction taken by American artists after World War II.

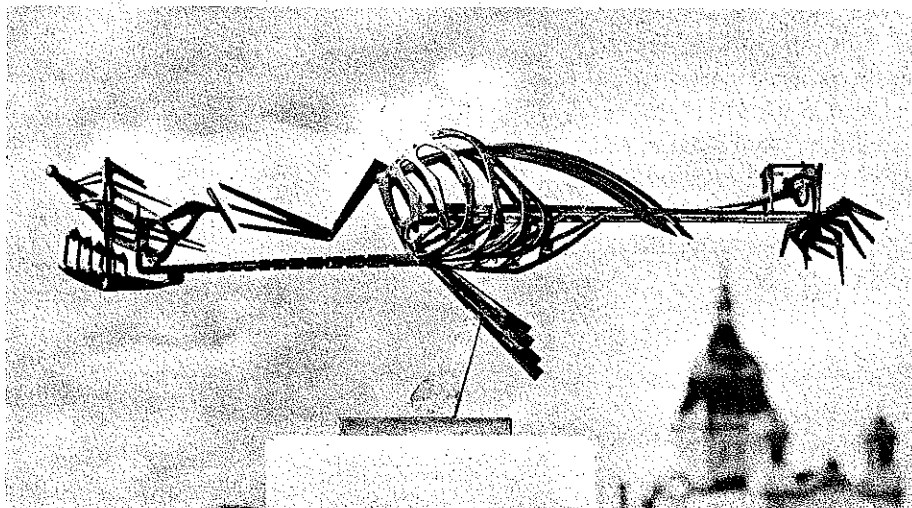
### Smith and Dehner

David Smith (1906–65), a pioneer sculptor of his generation working in welded steel, said of his medium: “The material called iron or steel I hold in high respect. . . . The metal itself possesses little art history. What associations it possesses are those of this century: power, structure, movement, progress, suspension, brutality.” Smith was born in Decatur, Illinois, and between 1926 and 1932 he studied painting, initially with John Sloan, at the Art Students League in New York (he was never formally trained as a sculptor). In the early thirties, intrigued by reproductions of Picasso’s welded-steel sculptures of 1929–30 (see fig. 15.50) as well as the works of Julio González (see fig. 15.53) he saw in John Graham’s collection, Smith began to experiment with constructed metal sculpture. He first learned to weld in an automobile plant in the summer of 1925, and in 1933 he established a studio in Brooklyn at

Terminal Iron Works, a commercial welding shop. During World War II he worked in a locomotive factory, where he advanced his technical experience in handling metals, and the sheer scale of locomotives suggested to him possibilities for the monumental development of his metal sculpture. Moreover, these experiences established the kinship that Smith felt with skilled industrial laborers.

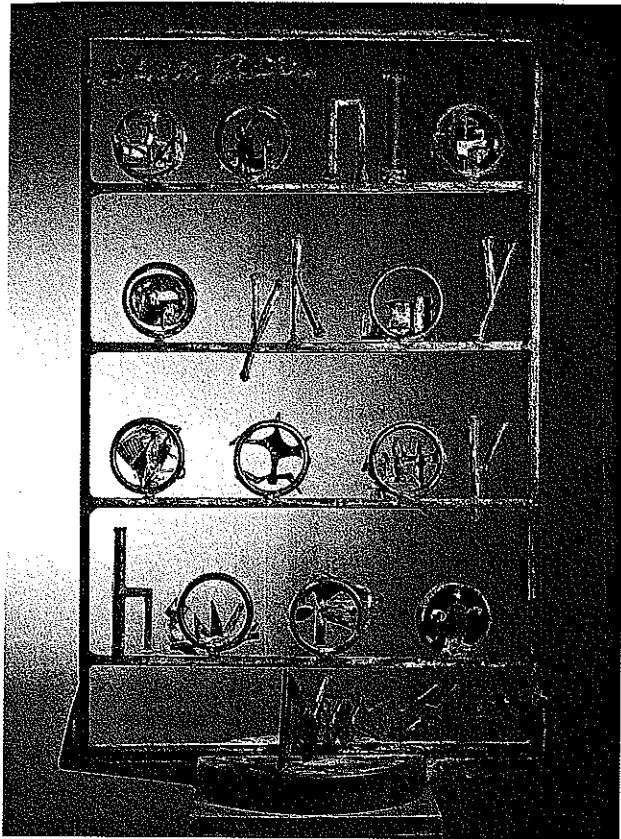
During the thirties and forties, Smith endowed his sculpture with a Surrealist quality, derived from Picasso, González, and Giacometti. In *The Royal Bird* (fig. 19.39), he suggests the viciously aggressive skeleton of some great airborne creature of prey. Smith and his wife, the sculptor Dorothy Dehner, had purchased a photograph of the fossils of a prehistoric flying creature, and both made use of the image in their work. His works of the early fifties are like steel drawings in space, as in *The Letter* (fig. 19.40), whose metal glyphs recall Gottlieb’s pictographic paintings (see fig. 19.33). Yet even when the sculptures were composed two-dimensionally, the natural setting, seen through the open spaces, introduced ever-changing suggestions of depth, color, and movement.

Toward the end of the war, Smith established a studio in Bolton Landing in upstate New York. The studio was a complete machine shop, and during the fifties and sixties Smith populated the surrounding fields with his sculptures, which were becoming more monumental in scale and conception. During much of his career Smith worked on sculpture in series, with different sequences sometimes overlapping chronologically and individual sculptures within series varying widely in form. The *Agricola* constructions (1952–59) continued the open, linear approach (with obvious agrarian overtones), while the *Sentinels* (1956–61) were usually monolithic, figurative sculptures, at times employing elements from farm or industrial machinery. *Sentinel I*, for example, includes a tire rod and industrial steel step, while the “head” of the sculpture resembles street signs. In contrast with most sculptors who used found objects in the sixties, Smith integrated such objects in the total structure so that their original function



**19.39** David Smith, *The Royal Bird*, 1947–48. Steel, bronze, and stainless steel, 21¼ × 59 × 9" (55.2 × 150 × 22.9 cm). Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

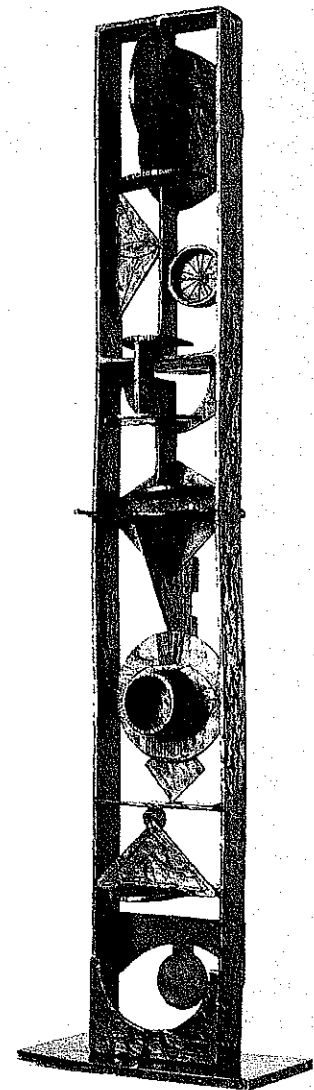
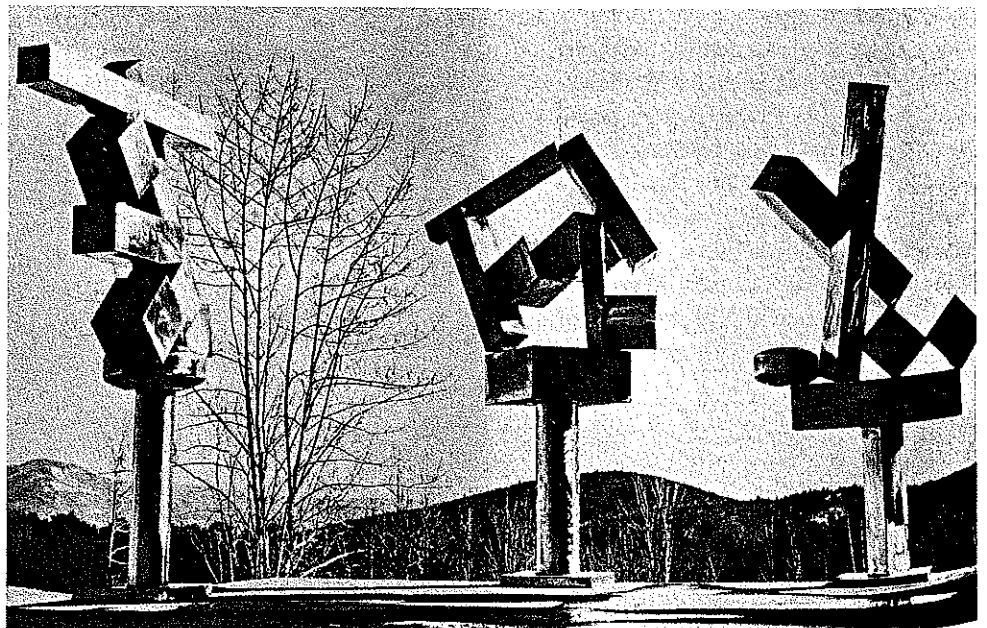




**19.40** David Smith, *The Letter*, 1950. Welded steel, 37 1/2 x 22 1/2 x 9 1/2" (95.6 x 58.1 x 23.5 cm). Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute Museum of Art, Utica, New York.

was subordinated to the totality of the new design. This was Constructivist sculpture in the original sense of Naum Gabo's *Realistic Manifesto*, in which voids do not merely surround mass but are articulated by form. Significant for future developments in sculpture is the fact that *Sentinel I* is not isolated on a pedestal but occupies the viewer's actual space.

**19.41** David Smith, left: *Cubi XVIII*, 1964. Stainless steel, height 9'8" (2.9 m). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; center: *Cubi XVII*, 1963. Stainless steel, height 9' (2.7 m). Dallas Museum of Art; right: *Cubi XIX*, 1964. Stainless steel, height 9'5" (2.9 m). The Tate Gallery, London.



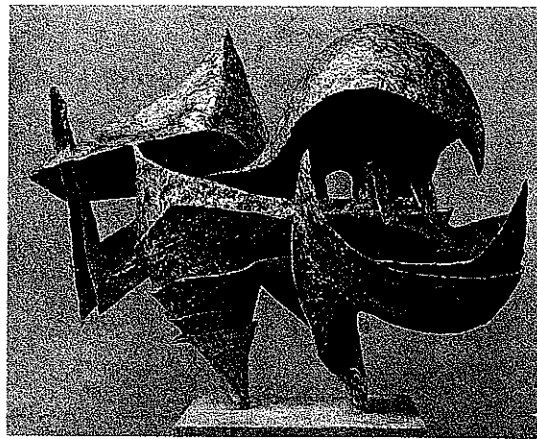
**19.42** Dorothy Dehner, *Nubian Queen*, 1960. Bronze, 56 x 14 x 8" (142.2 x 35.6 x 20.3 cm). Richard L. Eagan Fine Arts, New York.

In his last great series, begun in 1961 with the generic name of *Cubi*, Smith assembled monumental, geometric volumes in stainless steel (fig. 19.41). Always sensitive to the surfaces of his sculptures, Smith had often painted his sculptures in bright, flat color or with distinctive painterly textures. In the *Cubi* series he exercised particular care in the polishing of the surfaces to create effects of brilliant, all-over calligraphy out of the highly reflecting, light-saturated surfaces. The work communicates an intimate sense of the artist's touch. Smith only rarely employed workshop assistants and even the *Cubi* series, with its machinelike precision, was constructed and finished by the artist. Despite this concern for the personal, Smith's art was critical to the development of the more impersonal creations of Minimalist artists in the sixties.

**Dorothy Dehner** (1901–94) was overshadowed as an artist by her famous husband, David Smith, yet for nearly forty years she produced a distinguished body of sculpture whose origins should be considered within the Abstract Expressionist milieu. She met Smith while studying painting at the Art Students League in 1926 and later became acquainted with Davis, Gorky, and Avery. Dehner worked in various figurative styles until the late forties, when she also began to exhibit her work publicly. Although many of her early abstract paintings and drawings demonstrate a sculptor's sensibility, Dehner did not start making sculpture until 1955, five years after she and Smith had separated. *Nubian Queen* (fig. 19.42), a bronze from 1960, is an open-frame, totemic construction containing mysterious, pictographic signs. Like her contemporaries in the New York School, Dehner sought to develop a private language with universal implications, and, like them, as her title implies, she liked to tap the art of ancient civilizations for forms and meaning. "I am an archaeologist of sorts," she said. "I tamper with the past."

### Lipton and Lassaw

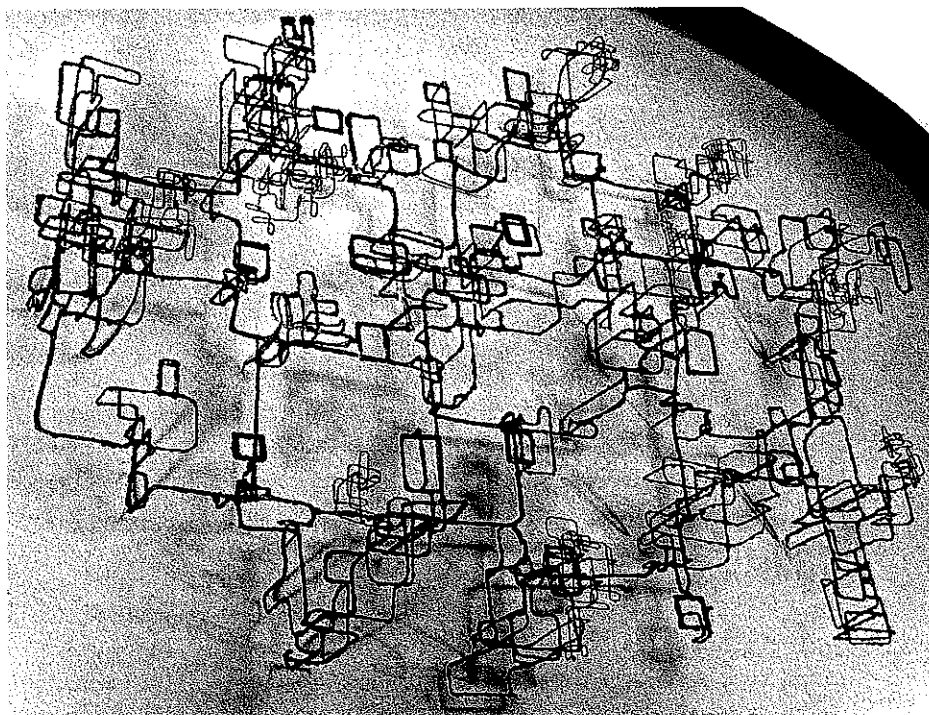
Originally trained as a dentist, **Seymour Lipton** (1903–81) made his first sculptures in the late twenties and began showing his work and teaching sculpture in the forties. For his mature works, he hammered and welded sheets of Monel metal, nickel-silver, or bronze into large spatial volumes, suggestive at times of threatening plant forms or predatory creatures with sharp, pro-



**19.43** Seymour Lipton, *Avenger*, 1957. Nickel-silver on Monel metal, length 23 × 18" (58.4 × 45.7 cm). Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence.

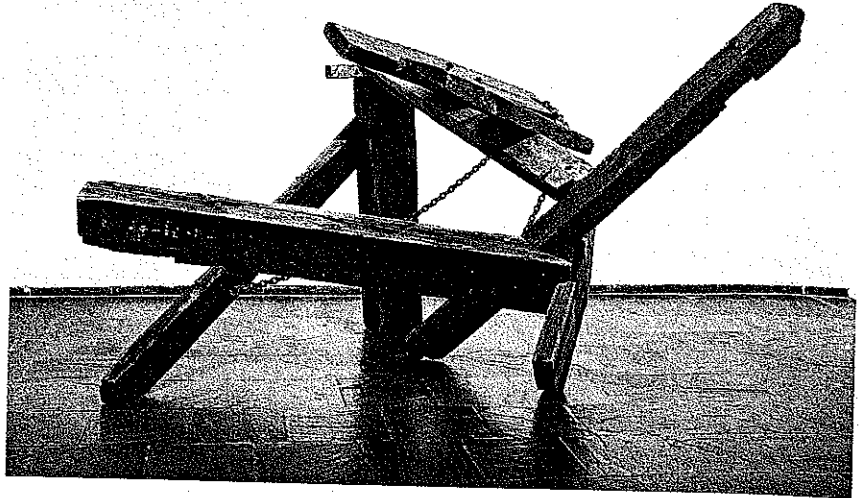
truding features (fig. 19.43). His works combine monumentality and repose with a sense of poetry and mystery. Spatially they offer an interplay of exterior and interior forms that emphasize the nature of the material.

As the works already seen would suggest, many American sculptors shared the dynamic, open-form aesthetics espoused by the Abstract Expressionists. **Ibram Lassaw** (b. 1913) even managed to three-dimensionalize Pollock's all-over webs of flowing lines, doing so in reliefs and freestanding constructions formed as intricate, welded cages (fig. 19.44). However, rather than Pollock's daring equilibrium of colliding opposites—freedom and control—Lassaw seemed more at one with the mystical harmony of Mark Tobey. And indeed he was a student of the German mystics and of Zen philosophy.

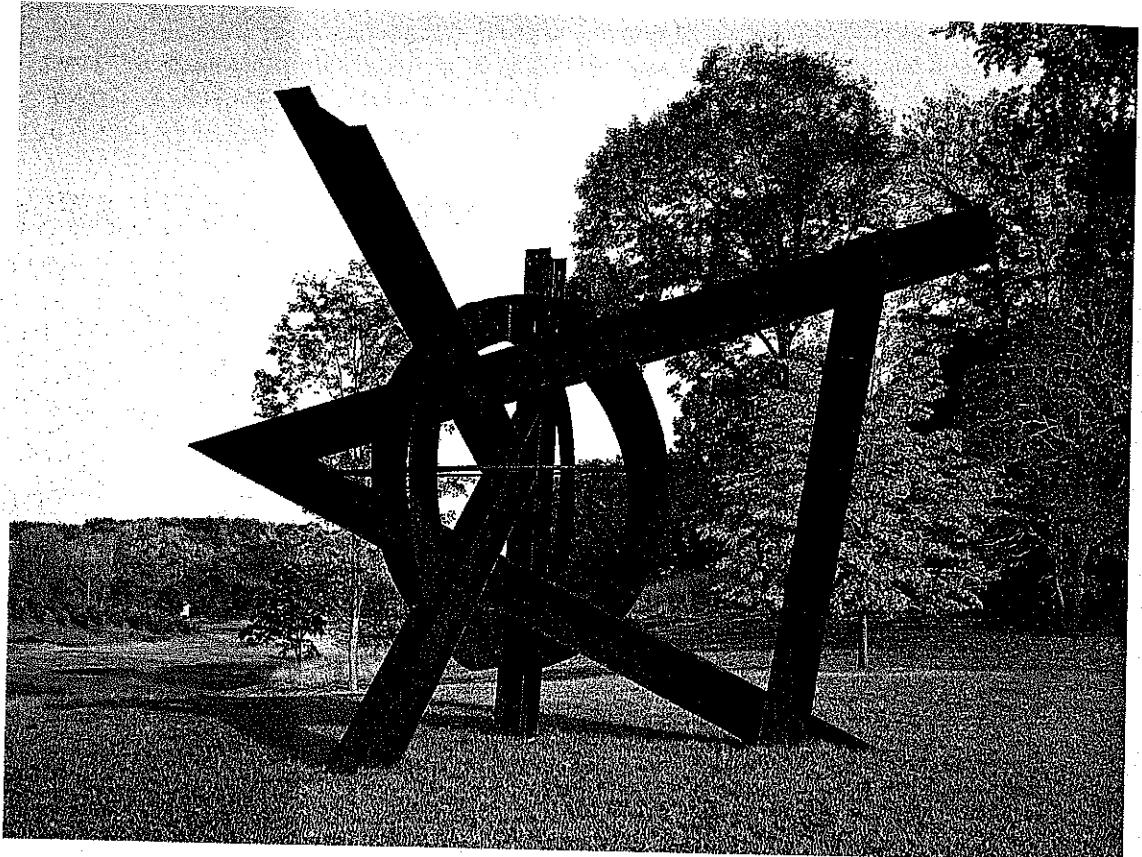


**19.44** Ibram Lassaw, *Clouds of Magellan*, 1953. Welded bronze and steel, 4'4" × 6'10" × 1'6" (1.32 × 2.1 × 4.6 m). Collection Philip Johnson, New York.

**19.45** Mark di Suvero, *Hankchampion*, 1960. Wood and chains, nine wooden pieces, overall 6'5¼" × 12'5" × 8'9" (2 × 3.8 × 2.7 m). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



**19.46** Mark di Suvero, *Aurora*, 1992–93. Steel, 16'4" × 19'6" × 26' (5 × 5.9 × 7.9 m). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



### Di Suvero and Chamberlain

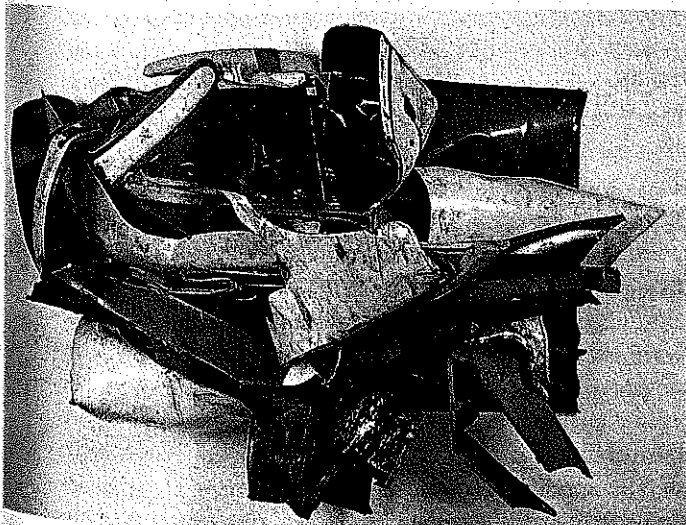
Mark di Suvero (b. 1933), much younger than the other artists discussed in this chapter, was still studying art at college in California when the Abstract Expressionists reached the pinnacles of fame in the mid-fifties. But only three years after arriving in New York in 1957, di Suvero was translating the bold gestures of Kline and de Kooning into a dynamic sculptural idiom. *Hankchampion*, 1960 (fig. 19.45), consists of massive, rough timbers that project in a precarious, even threatening, manner. These early wood pieces sometimes incorporated chain, rope, and

found objects, like barrels or tires, scavenged from the industrial landscape. Although di Suvero admired Rodin and Giacometti, the most meaningful and immediate artistic example for him was Smith, who changed sculpture, di Suvero said, from an “objet d’art type of thing to something that is really strong, American industrial art.” Despite a drastic accident in 1960, when he was nearly crushed to death in an elevator, by the mid-sixties di Suvero was making works in steel so large they required a crane. Although he has made many small-scale works, he is best known for the monumental outdoor sculptures he has made since that

time, including *Aurora* (fig. 19.46), which is named after a poem about New York City by Federico García Lorca. These works, which enter the realm of architecture by virtue of their scale and I-beam construction, are as much at home in the urban environment as in a natural landscape. In the spirit of Constructivism, di Suvero's jutting, angled girders shape the void with energy-charged forms that have no sense of central mass. And in the spirit of Calder, some of his mammoth sculptures have moving parts that invite audience participation. In such ways di Suvero's work, despite its scale and mass, shares much with the playful spirit of Neo-Dada and Pop art.

**John Chamberlain** (b. 1927) began to make sculpture in the early sixties, works that seemed like three-dimensional expressions of Abstract Expressionism's explosive, painterly styles and that imply at times an almost violent approach to the medium. Chamberlain has used parts of junked automobiles, with their highly enameled, colored surfaces, to create allover, abstract constructions of surprising beauty. Like di Suvero, he uses industrial tools, cutting and crushing shapes that he then pieces together, like an assemblage, through a trial-and-error process. The works can be either freestanding sculptures or, as in *Dolores James* (fig. 19.47), wall-mounted reliefs.

Chamberlain's spontaneous, not entirely predictable, methods parallel the Abstract Expressionists' balance of control and accident but share di Suvero's generally lighter, less emotionally charged, spirit. "There's no formula," he said. For example, one night, when he was nearing completion of *Dolores James*, he returned late to his studio and heaved an eight-pound sledgehammer at the sculpture, achieving exactly the final touch he sought. Unlike the Abstract Expressionists, Chamberlain avoided ascribing profound meaning to his works. In this he is closer to many artists of his own generation who also made, or make, art from society's detritus.

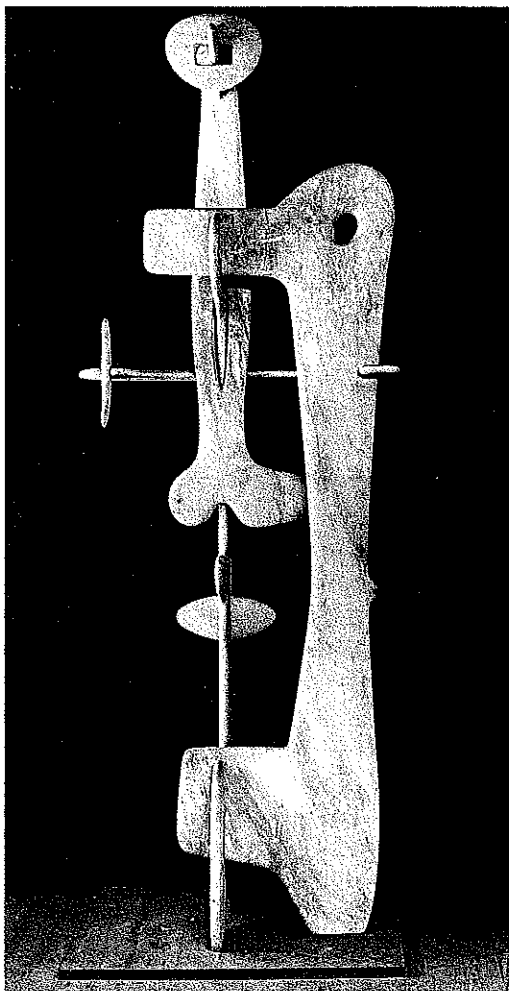


**19.47** John Chamberlain, *Dolores James*, 1962. Welded and painted automobile parts, 6'4" × 8'1" × 3'3" (1.9 × 2.5 × 0.99 m). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

## Textures of the Surreal: Biomorphic Sculpture and Assemblage

### Noguchi

**Isamu Noguchi** (1904–88) was born in Los Angeles of a Japanese father and an American mother, and then lived in Japan from the age of two to fourteen before returning to the United States. In 1927, following some academic training and his decision to become a sculptor, Noguchi went to Paris, where he saw the work of the Cubists, Surrealists, and Constructivists. He quickly became acquainted with the American expatriate artistic community in the city, occasionally assisting Calder on his *Circus* (see chapter 17) and, most significantly, serving for a time as assistant to Brancusi, from whom he learned direct carving methods. On visits to China and Japan during the thirties, he studied brush painting and ceramic sculpture. He made his first abstract sculptures while in Paris, but his first thoroughly original works date to the forties, when he made Surrealistic carvings in marble or slate. In *Kouros* (fig. 19.48) he evoked the human form, not only by the Greek title, but also by the Miróesque biomorphism of the eyeholed and crossed,



**19.48** Isamu Noguchi, *Kouros*, 1944–45. Pink Georgia marble on slate base, 10' × 2'10½" × 3'6" (3 × 0.87 × 0.7 m). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



19.49 Isamu Noguchi, *The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum*, opened to the public in 1985. Long Island City, New York.

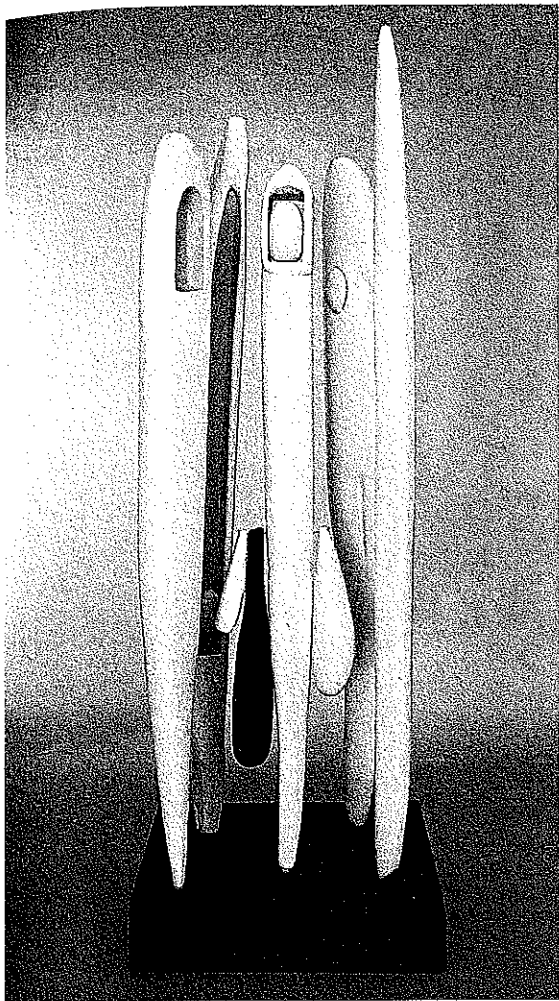
bonelike forms, all interlocked and arranged in the vertical orientation of a standing figure. The idea for sculptures of this type had originated with Noguchi's 1944 set design for *Herodiade*, a ballet by premier American choreographer Martha Graham. In the ballet, Salome dances before her mirror, in which she sees, according to Noguchi, "her bones, the potential skeleton of her body." As Noguchi's renown spread internationally in the fifties, he began to receive commissions for public sculptures and gardens around the world. In Long Island City, where he had had a studio since 1961 (he later established a studio in Japan as well), Noguchi established a garden and museum devoted to his work (fig. 19.49). The works shown here give evidence of the many textures and forms that the artist could mine from stone, from immaculately smooth and geometric forms to organic ones that incorporate accidental forms caused in the quarry process.

### Bourgeois

French-born Louise Bourgeois (b. 1911), best known as a sculptor, is hard to classify because of her active work in a variety of media. She began as a painter-engraver in the milieu of Surrealism. Early in her artistic career, when she was struggling with the multiple roles of mother, wife, and artist, she made a disquieting group of paintings

that rendered women literally as houses or *Femmes-Maisons*. Bourgeois turned to carved sculpture in the late forties, creating roughly hewn, vertical forms in wood that she called *Personages*. Their closest historical analogue is perhaps the Surrealist sculptures of Giacometti. The *Personages*, Bourgeois said, are each endowed with individual personalities and are best experienced as a group. Indeed, the five vertical elements of *Quarantania I* (fig. 19.50) were originally separate sculptures that Bourgeois later decided to unite on a single base. Like all of Bourgeois's work, the *Personages* have powerful psychic associations rooted in her own biography. In the sixties, Bourgeois experimented with new materials such as latex, plaster, and marble to create globular, overtly sexual shapes that bubble forth as though in the process of being born. Bourgeois could achieve a palpable sense of the organic within an essentially abstract composition. The highly polished cluster of forms in *Cumul I* (fig. 19.51), for example, seems to emerge from a thin membrane before our very eyes.

The importance of the feminist movement of the sixties and seventies to Bourgeois's work can be strongly felt in her later career. At the age of eighty, she embarked on one of her most intriguing series, the elaborate, multimedia environments that she called *Cells*. Within the glass and

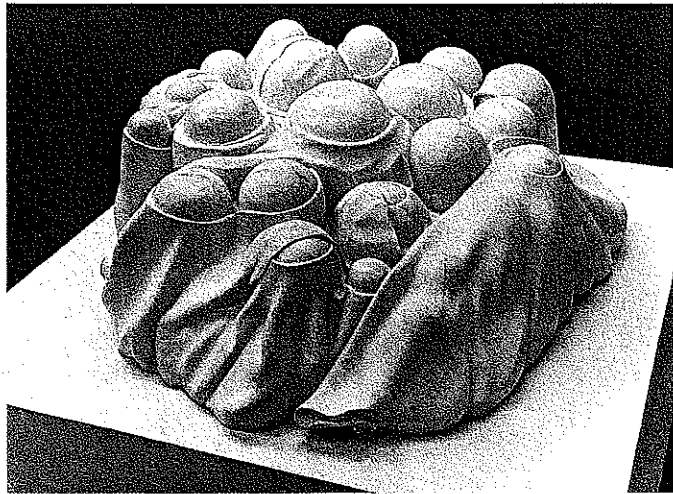


**19.50** Louise Bourgeois, *Quarantania I*, 1947–53. Painted wood on wood base, 62 $\frac{3}{4}$  × 11 $\frac{1}{4}$  × 12" (158.4 × 29.8 × 30.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

chain-link enclosure of *Cell (You Better Grow Up)*, 1993 (fig. 19.52), are two mirrors. Between them is a roughly cut marble base on which sit exquisite carvings of an adult hand grasping those of a child. Other objects include furniture, perfume bottles, and a glass object that contains a tiny glass figurine. Bourgeois has said that the figurine and the child's hands are self-portraits and form part of a work about "the frightened world of a child who doesn't like being dependent and who suffers from it." Like many women artists, Bourgeois did not receive proper recognition for her remarkable achievements until late in her career. In the eighties, her long involvement with performance and installation art struck a chord of common purpose with trends during that decade (see chapter 26).

### Cornell

Also rooted in Surrealism is the work of **Joseph Cornell** (1903–72), a highly cultivated American who brought great distinction to the tradition of assemblage. In the early thirties, Cornell became acquainted with the Julien Levy Gallery in New York, a center for the display of European Surrealism. His first experiments with collage were inspired

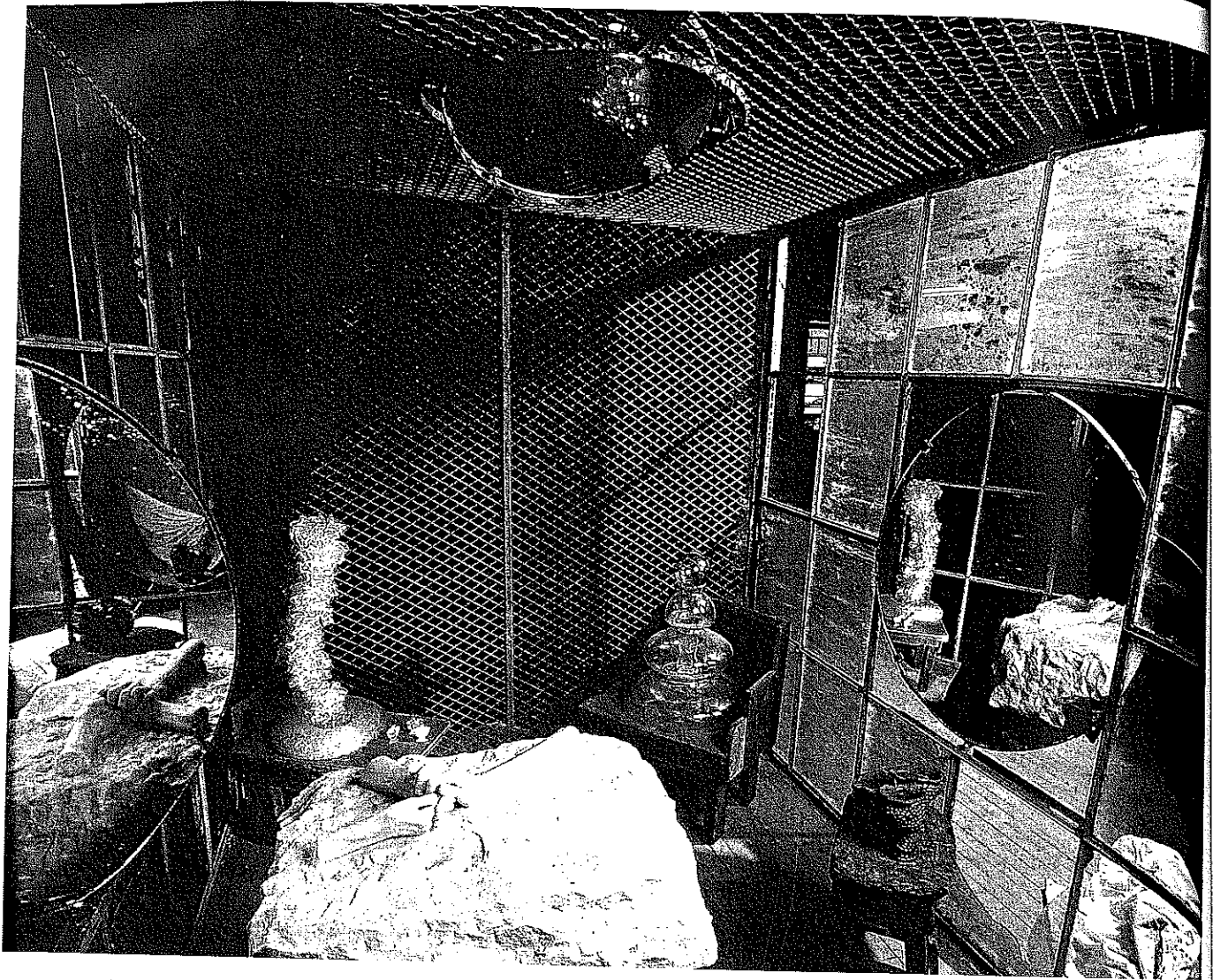


**19.51** Louise Bourgeois, *Cumul I*, 1968. Marble, 22 $\frac{1}{4}$  × 50 × 48" (56.5 × 127 × 121.9 cm). Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, Paris.

by works of Max Ernst, and soon Levy was exhibiting his small constructions along with the works of the Surrealists. By the mid-thirties, Cornell had settled on his formula of a simple box, usually glass-fronted, in which he arranged found objects such as cork balls, photographs, and maps. Cornell read widely, especially French nineteenth-century literature, but his interests were broad, from poetry and ballet to astronomy and other natural sciences. He haunted the penny arcades, libraries, dime stores, souvenir shops, art galleries, and movie houses of New York, searching out the ephemera that became the content of his enchanting assemblages. In his boxes Cornell, who lived reclusively and rarely spoke about his work, created a personal world filled with nostalgic associations—of home, family, childhood, and of all the literature he had read and the art he had seen. As one critic has noted, "He treated the ephemeral object as if it were the rarest heirloom of a legendary prince or princess."

*Medici Slot Machine* of 1942 (fig. 19.53) centers around reproductions of a Renaissance portrait, multiple images taken from the early cinema, and symbols suggesting relations between past and present. Everything is allusion or romantic reminiscence gathered together, as one idea or image suggested another, to create intimate and magical worlds. As in all his creations, Cornell carefully organized his imagery within a loosely geometric format.

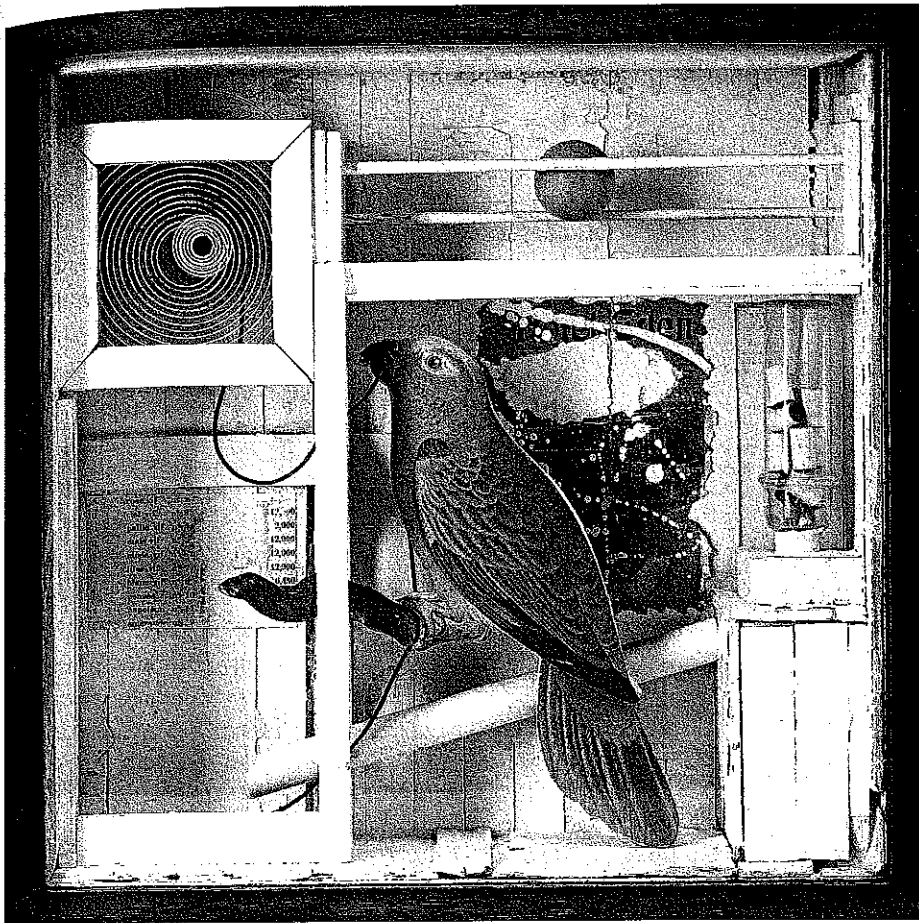
To enhance their quality of nostalgia, Cornell often deliberately distressed his surfaces, sometimes placing his boxes in the elements to achieve a weathered, time-battered appearance. In *Untitled (The Hotel Eden)* (fig. 19.54), the ad for Hotel Eden is tattered and the paint on the box is cracked and worn. Cornell usually built a number of boxes around specific themes, such as the *Aviaries* of the forties, which include images of exotic birds. As is typical of his work, this composition is rich with associations. The Hotel Eden ad suggests the garden of paradise, while the spiral form at the upper left probably refers to a work



**19.52** Louise Bourgeois, *Cell (You Better Grow Up)*, 1993. Steel, glass, marble, ceramic, and wood, 6'11" × 6'10" × 6'11" (2.1 × 2.1 × 2.1 m). Collection the artist.



**19.53** Joseph Cornell, *Medici Slot Machine*, 1942. Construction, 13 7/8 × 12 × 4 7/8" (34.3 × 30.5 × 10.8 cm). Private collection.



**19.54** Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (The Hotel Eden)*, c. 1945. Mixed-media construction, 15½ × 15¼ × 4¾" (38.4 × 40 × 12.1 cm). National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

by Cornell's friend Marcel Duchamp. Cornell was included in the historic 1936 exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, *Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism*, where his works were installed next to Miró's Surrealist *Object* from 1936 (see fig. 15.14). Although the affinities between *Untitled (Hotel Eden)* and Miró's sculpture are obvious, Cornell objected to being classified with the Surrealists, saying that while he admired their art, he had no interest in the dream world and the subconscious and preferred to focus on "healthier possibilities." By the fifties, Cornell knew many of the Abstract Expressionist painters who were his contemporaries, but his quiet, small-scale works had less in common with their turbulent canvases than with the assemblage art of the next generation (see fig. 21.10).

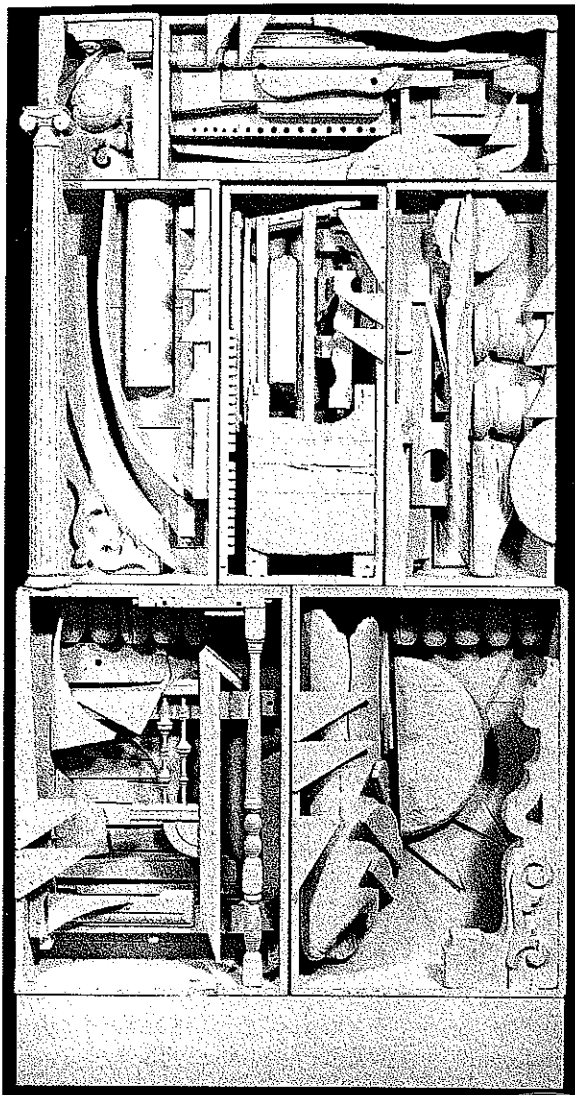
### Nevelson

Louise Nevelson (1899–1988) also worked in a tradition of assemblage, but with results quite different from those of Cornell. She studied voice, dance, and art in New York in the late twenties. In 1931 she went to Europe, studying painting for a time with Hans Hofmann in Munich and playing small roles in movies in Berlin and Vienna. Nevelson always maintained a flair for the theatrical in her eccentric dress and flamboyant manner, and her mature work as a sculptor also manifested a distinctively theatrical sensibility. She liked to control the light and space within

which the viewer experienced her work, which, like that of contemporary painters such as Pollock and Rothko, was environmental in its effect. In the early forties, Nevelson began to make Surrealist-inspired assemblage sculptures from found objects and received her first solo exhibition in New York. Her characteristic works of the fifties were large wooden walls fitted with individual boxes filled with scores of carefully arranged found objects—usually sawed-up fragments of furniture or woodwork rescued from old, destroyed houses. (It is not inconsequential that her Russian father was a builder who ran a lumberyard.) Nevelson then painted her sculpture a uniform mat black, white, or, in her later work, reflective gold. *Dawn's Wedding Chapel I* formed part of a large installation at The Museum of Modern Art in 1959 called *Dawn's Wedding Feast*. It included freestanding, totemic constructions as well as wall pieces, all suggesting a site for ancient ceremony and ritual. The shallow boxes were filled with assemblages of whitewashed balusters, finials, posts, moldings and other architectural remnants (fig. 19.55). Despite their composition from junk, they achieve a quality of decayed elegance, reminiscent of the graceful old houses from which the elements were mined.

In the sixties, Nevelson relied less on found materials and had boxes fabricated according to her specifications (fig. 19.56). Her work took on a more pristine character, with regularized, sometimes symmetrical forms, tendencies





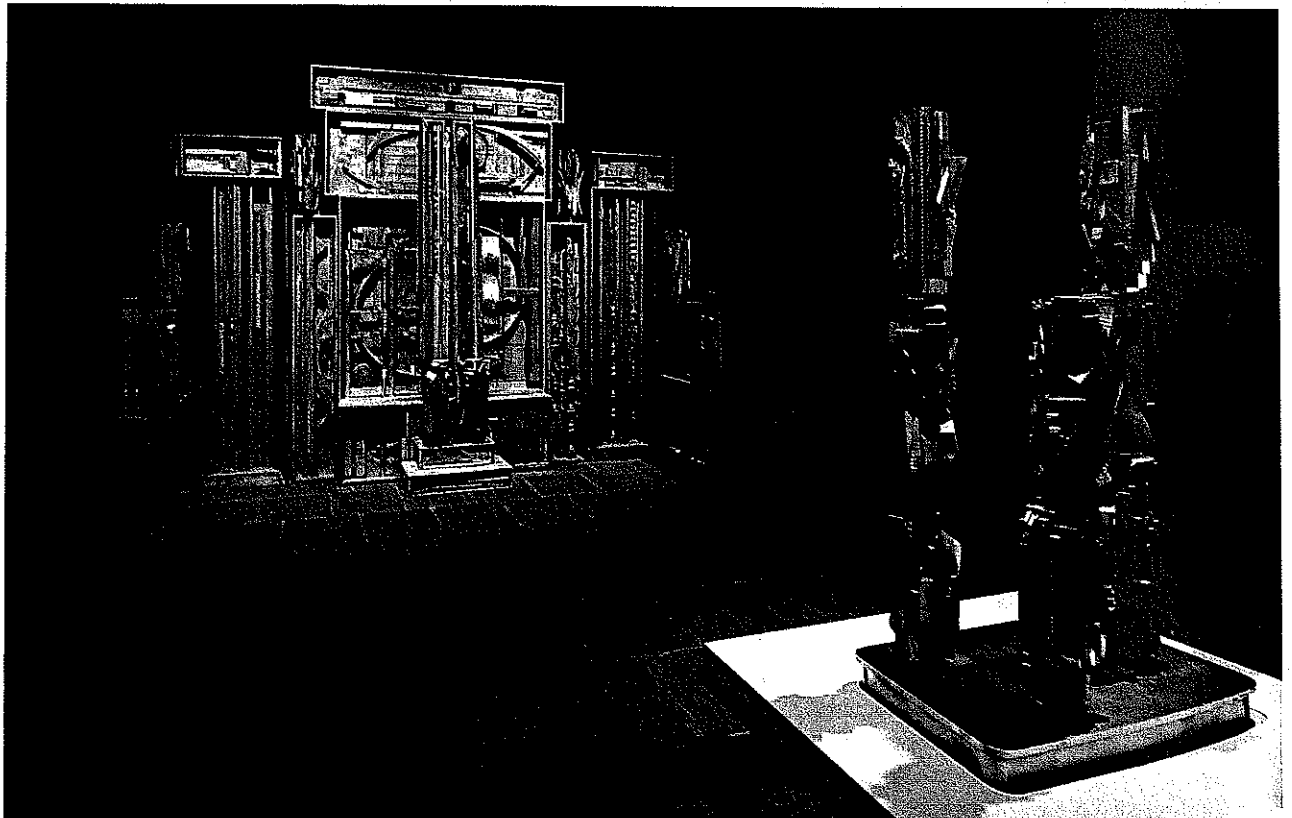
**19.55** Louise Nevelson, *Dawn's Wedding Chapel I*, 1959. Painted wood, 7'6" × 4'3" (2.3 × 1.3 m). Private collection

that accorded with the Minimalist aesthetic of the decade. Despite the new immaculate precision, these works still have the altarlike quality of the wooden walls. In the later sixties, the prolific Nevelson experimented with new materials, including clear Plexiglas, and began to execute commissions for large-scale outdoor works in aluminum, steel, and Cor-Ten steel.

### Expressive Vision: Developments in American Photography

Depression, political upheaval, and war shaped the vision of photographers in the forties just as much as that of painters. Meanwhile, photography—by then ubiquitous not only in news coverage and advertising but also in professional journals, books, and special exhibitions—had exerted an unavoidably powerful effect on the vision of everyone, painters perhaps most of all.

**19.56** Louise Nevelson, left: *An American Tribute to the British People*, 1960–65. Wood painted gold, 10'2" × 14'3" (3.1 × 4.3 m). Tate Gallery, London; right: *Sun Garden, No. 1*, 1964. Wood painted gold, 6' × 3'5" (1.8 × 1.04 m). Private collection.





19.57 Robert Capa, *Normandy Invasion, June 6, 1944*, Gelatin-silver print.

### Capa and Miller

Some of the field pictures made by the Hungarian-American photographer **Robert Capa** (1913–54), during the Spanish Civil War and World War II (fig. 19.57), seemed to find a parallel in Abstract Expressionism's fluid organization and its conception of the picture as an expression of personal, tragic experience universalized through abstract gesture. It was as if photojournalism, scientific aerial photography, and microphotography helped prepare the human eye for the pictorial formulations of Abstract Expressionism. Capa was deeply committed to the process of the photojournalistic essay as the means for bearing his intended content and felt it could be done only by being as close to the subject matter as possible. He was killed by a landmine while photographing the war in Indochina.

Another photographer who witnessed the carnage of war firsthand was **Lee Miller** (1907–77), an American who spent most of her adult life in Europe, first in the Parisian circle of Man Ray between 1929 and 1932 and, after 1942, as an official U.S. forces war correspondent. She was present in 1945 at the liberation of Dachau and Buchenwald concentration camps, and the harrowing scenes she recorded there are among the most painfully revelatory images of the war (fig. 19.58). Some of them were soon featured in *Vogue* magazine, where her work had been published since the late twenties, with the heading "Believe It." The ironic contrast between photography's ability to capture moments of extreme human misery and the use of such images to lend impact to glossy publications is a paradox particularly evident from the postwar period onward.

### White, Siskind, Porter, and Callahan

The grandeur and metaphor of Abstract Expressionist painting encouraged photographers to reinvestigate the potential of both straight and manipulated procedures for creating abstract imagery. Among the photographers who used straight photography to discover imagery capable of yielding abstract forms potent with mystical feeling



19.58 Lee Miller, *Dead SS Guard in the Canal at Dachau*, 1945. Modern gelatin-silver print, 1988. Lee Miller Archives, England.

was **Minor White** (1908–76). In works like the one seen here (fig. 19.59), White's vision paralleled stylistic developments in the art of Abstract Expressionism's gestural painters, as did his devotion to photography as a form of self-expression. "I photograph not that which is," he said, "but that which I AM." As a teacher and writer, and founder, as well as a longtime editor, of *Aperture* magazine, White had a vast and enduring influence on a whole generation of younger photographers.

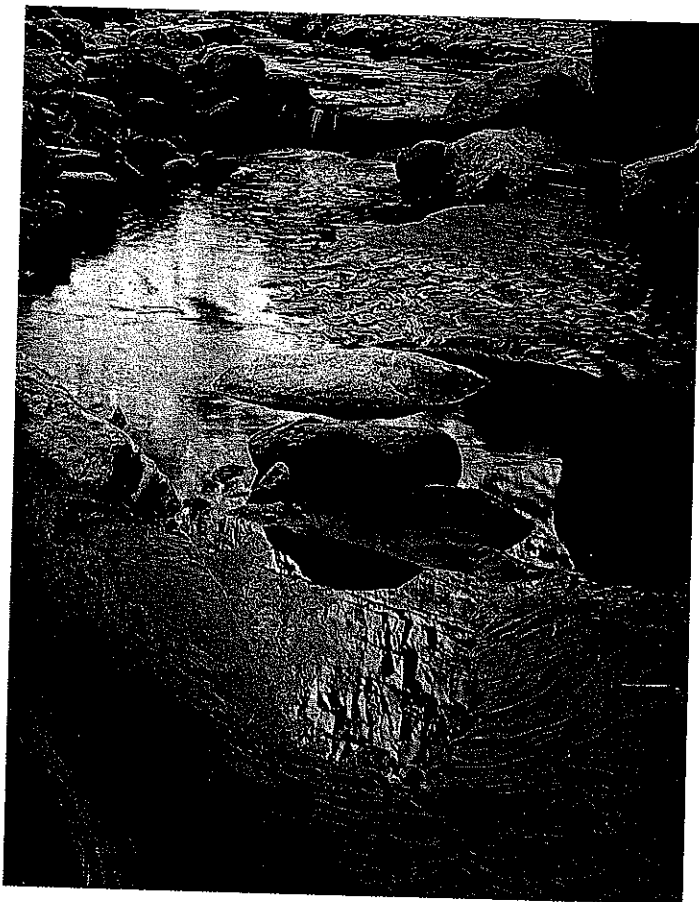


19.59 Minor White, *Sun in Rock, Devil's Slide*, 1947, October 12, 1947. Gelatin-silver print, 7% × 9% (18.7 × 24.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

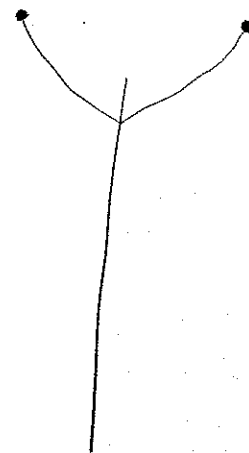


19.60 Aaron Siskind, *Chicago* 1949, Gelatin-silver print.

Aaron Siskind (1903–91), too, lost interest in subject matter as a source of emotive content and turned instead toward flat, richly textured patterns discovered on old weathered walls, segments of advertising signs, graffiti, and peeling posters (fig. 19.60). In his preoccupation with the expressive qualities of two-dimensional design, Siskind found himself in sympathetic company among painters



19.61 Eliot Porter, *Dark Canyon, Glen Canyon*, 1965. Dye transfer print, 10% × 7% (25.9 × 20 cm). The Art Institute of Chicago.

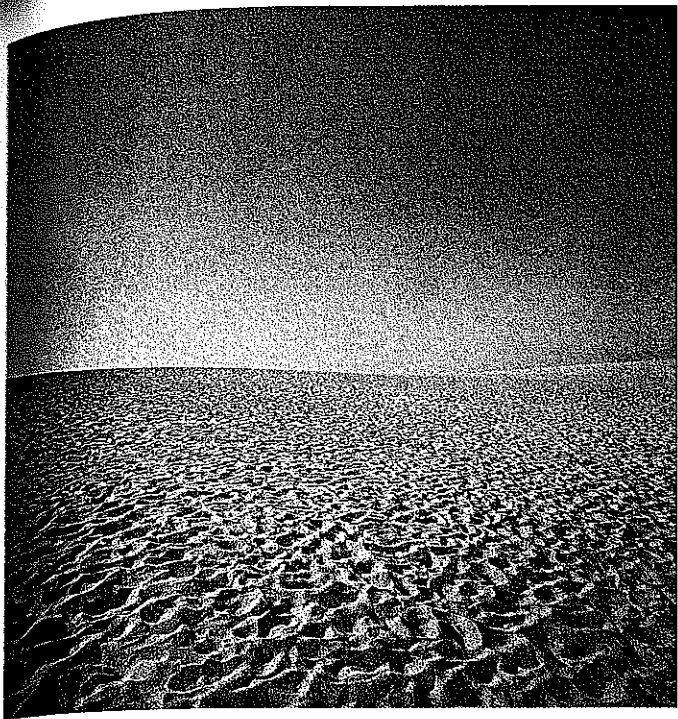


19.62 Harry Callahan, *Weed Against the Sky*, Detroit, 1948. Gelatin-silver print.

like Kline and Willem de Kooning, whose influence he acknowledged.

Another photographer whose work might look at home with New York gestural paintings was Eliot Porter (1901–90). Porter portrayed nature in the tradition of Ansel Adams (see fig. 18.23), but, unlike most noncommercial photographers of his generation, he worked in color (fig. 19.61). To attain such quality, Porter, unusually for a color photographer, made his own color-separation negatives and dye transfers.

Harry Callahan (1912–99), a friend and colleague of Siskind's, has generated photographs of such uncompromising sparseness and subtlety that they often bordered on abstraction. His principal influence came from Ansel Adams and the former Bauhaus faculty at the Institute of Design in Chicago, where he taught from 1946. He later founded the photography department at the Rhode Island School of Design. Callahan has worked continuously with three deeply felt personal themes—his wife, Eleanor; the urban scene; and simple, unspoiled nature. His study of a spindly weed (fig. 19.62) is entirely straightforward, yet making sense of the form requires close scrutiny. In his later Cape Cod landscape, Callahan shifted from the isolated close-up of a motif in nature to seemingly limitless space (fig. 19.63). This distilled view of the world, with its emphatic horizontality and nearly monochrome tonality, recalls late works by Rothko. "I think that every artist continually wants to reach the edge of nothingness," Callahan said.



**19.63** Harry Callahan, *Cape Cod*, 1972. Gelatin-silver print, 9% × 9% (24.4 × 24.8 cm).

### Levitt and DeCarava

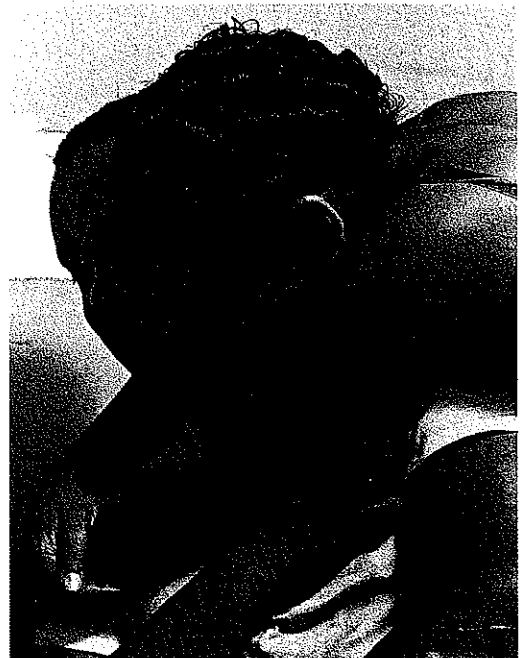
Obviously, not all photographers active in the forties and fifties were combing the landscape for abstract forms of expression. New York photographer **Helen Levitt** (b. 1913) began recording ordinary street life with her hand-held Leica camera in the late thirties. Crucial to her was the discovery of the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson (see fig. 15.68), and her magically complex image of children playing with a broken mirror in the street (fig. 19.64) is more reminiscent of the Frenchman's "decisive moment" than the social indictments of documentary photographers such as Lewis Hine (see fig. 18.6). Levitt included this and other scenes from Spanish Harlem in a book called *A Way of Seeing*, 1965. It included an essay by James Agee, the writer who had already collaborated on a book with Levitt's friend, Walker Evans (see chapter 18).

Self-taught photographer **Roy DeCarava** (b. 1919) grew up in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance, a flourishing of urban African-American culture that was recorded by his older contemporary James Van Der Zee (see fig. 18.50). By 1952 his photographs had earned him a prestigious Guggenheim grant, the first ever awarded to an African-American. "I want to photograph Harlem through the Negro people," he wrote in his proposal, "Morning, noon, night, at work, going to work, at play, in the streets, talking, kidding, laughing, in the home, in the playground, in the schools. ... I want to show the strength, the wisdom, the dignity of the Negro people." One of the resulting photographs is a tender and moving portrait of an embracing couple (fig. 19.65), which seems to sum up in a single image all the humanity the artist experienced in an entire



**19.64** Helen Levitt, *New York*, c. 1940. Gelatin-silver print. Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

community. In 1955 DeCarava, like Levitt, joined forces with a noted writer, in this case the poet Langston Hughes, to publish his Harlem photographs as a book, aptly titled *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*.



**19.65** Roy DeCarava, *Shirley Embracing Sam*, 1952. Gelatin-silver print 12% × 10% (32.9 × 28.1 cm). Collection The DeCarava Archive.