

The Museum of Modern Art

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The most comprehensive exhibition of Willem de Kooning's work ever assembled will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from March 5 through April 27. It is intended as a look at the artist in mid-career, beginning with his first mature works in the mid-1930's, and emphasizes pictures that have seldom if ever been shown in public. The Museum's Guest Director of the show, Thomas B. Hess, who has also written the accompanying monograph*, says that while the show does not attempt to define de Kooning's oeuvre nor its development, it demonstrates why many artists, critics, and collectors are convinced that Willem de Kooning has been and remains one of the most original, influential, and creative painters at work in the middle of our century.

The exhibition of 147 works -- paintings, drawings, pastels, collages -- opened at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and then traveled to The Tate Gallery in London. Both European showings were under the auspices of the International Council of The Museum of Modern Art. After New York, where the exhibition has been installed by Alicia Legg, Associate Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, in collaboration with Mr. Hess, the exhibition will be seen at The Art Institute of Chicago and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

About a dozen major oils, three times that many sketches, plus a stack of drawings have been completed since January 1, 1967 -- the cut-off date of this exhibition -- making it satisfactorily incomplete and open-ended, Mr. Hess says. Many of these very recent works will be on view at the M. Knoedler and Company gallery in New York at the time of The Museum of Modern Art exhibition.

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*WILLEM DE KOONING by Thomas B. Hess. Text by Thomas B. Hess, selections from the writings of Willem de Kooning, bibliography, catalogue, and index. 170 pages; 115 illustrations (16 in color). Hardbound, \$8.95; Paperbound, \$4.95. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Hardbound edition distributed to the trade in the United States and Canada by New York Graphic Society Ltd.; in the United Kingdom by Trans Atlantic Book Service, Ltd.; and internationally by Feffer and Simons, Inc.

Among the common denominators that unite him with his colleagues and friends -- variously called Abstract Expressionists, New York School, Action Painters, etc. -- are: emphasis on big, rough statements, often monumental in scale; an intimate relationship between the artist and his work which is carried over into the relationship between the spectator and the art; and experimentation with techniques. The central issue in de Kooning's art, Mr. Hess maintains, is his creative and revolutionary use of ambiguity.

De Kooning came to the United States from Holland in 1926. At first he supported himself at commercial art jobs, but after a year on the Federal Art Project (W.P.A.) in 1935 he decided to paint and do odd jobs on the side. "The situation was the same, but I had a different attitude," he has said. His first public appearance came during this period: a study for a mural was exhibited at The Museum of Modern Art.

De Kooning experimented with many styles in the 20's, but by the early thirties two themes became dominant that mark the beginnings of his mature development: the first, a series of abstractions; the second, a series of figures, of Men, sitting or standing, and later of Women. "The Men have a sad, exiled look their dark flat eyes echo the colors of the background, giving them a hollow, tragic air," Mr. Hess comments.

Describing a new kind of modern painting that emerged in New York in the 40's and of which de Kooning was a leader, Mr. Hess continues: "What had happened was that the New York artists ... changed the basic hypothesis of art. It can be described (in a simile) as a shift from aesthetics to ethics; the picture was no longer supposed to be Beautiful, but True -- an accurate representation or equivalence of the artist's interior sensation and experience. If this meant that a painting had to look vulgar, battered, and clumsy -- so much the better."

De Kooning's drawings and paintings fed off each other during this time, until he created a new kind of painting, or perhaps a new kind of drawing, in a series of black-and-white abstractions which were exhibited in his first one-man show in 1948."...there

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are no lines. Neither are there backgrounds or foregrounds. The blacks and whites push in front of and slip behind each otherThere is an extraordinary lucidity - and ambiguity."

This one-man show marked de Kooning's emergence from the artists' underground world; it was enthusiastically accepted by the artist public, which in turn influenced a growing number of the general public. In 1950 Attic, the climax of the black-and-white abstractions, was shown in the Whitney Annual and later that year de Kooning's work, including Excavation, the largest of his abstractions, was shown in an exhibition at the Venice Biennale. This painting was also in The Museum of Modern Art's show "Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America" in 1951, and in the fall of that year, it won the top prize in the 60th Annual of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Almost as soon as Excavation left his studio in 1950, de Kooning tacked a seventy-inch high canvas to his painting wall and began to paint Woman I. "Most of those who knew de Kooning's work and^{had} followed his heroic struggles with Woman I felt it was a triumph. Many younger artists, already in reaction to the rigorously intellectual climate of Abstract Expressionism, considered it a permission to revive figure painting," Mr. Hess says. But the public was scandalized by de Kooning's hilarious, lacerated goddesses, as were the doctrinaire defenders of abstract art. Woman I was bought by The Museum of Modern Art, however, and soon became one of the most widely reproduced works of the 1950's.

Woman I was completed and painted out literally hundreds of times during the 18 months de Kooning worked on it. He also made hundreds of studies, drawings, and small oils. "She represents many things, but one of her aspects, surely, is that of the Black Goddess: the mother who betrays the son, gets rid of the father, destroys the home," Mr. Hess observes, adding that de Kooning has made the same complaint about the reception of the Woman series as Joyce did about critical attacks on Ulysses: nobody even noticed that it was funny.

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His ideal of "intimate proportions" was perhaps not achieved in Woman, I, a noble battlefield rather than a completed painting, Mr. Hess says, but de Kooning did achieve this triumphantly in the Women that followed immediately thereafter and in those which were to come in the sixties. The Women who followed the first version are gentler creatures. "If there had been a Black Goddess, de Kooning had exorcised her. The girls who followed are tragicomic heroines. They have the power of de Kooning's extraordinary art; you could name a hurricane after any one of them. But like hurricanes they are an intimate part of our climate."

In 1955, after having painted about 15 women, large and small, including Woman and Bicycle (1952-53), Woman VI (1953), and Marilyn Monroe (1954), the image began to disappear from de Kooning's canvas. "Abstract shapes with a 'landscape' sense of light and space started to take over by the spring of 1955, the figure was engulfed in the new forms, as a jungle will obliterate a shrine."

From 1956 until 1963, when he moved to The Springs on Long Island to live year round, de Kooning's fame increased. He was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and was awarded the President's Freedom Award at the White House.

During this period de Kooning simplified and clarified his images: Parc Rosenberg (1957) and Suburb in Havana (1958) are already highly simplified when compared to Easter Monday (1956). The simplification of shape and form was the necessary discipline to arrive at his new colors, Mr. Hess says. Other abstractions from this period in the exhibition borrowed from 19 public and private collections, include Police Gazette (1954-55), Gotham News (1955-56), and Composition (1955).

"Fortunately, art cannot be explained, only felt," Mr. Hess observes. "The newer it is, the stronger we feel it, and the less able we are to account for its power. Thus, comment on de Kooning's pictures since 1963 must be tentative, even though they are among the most convincing of all his work.

"The recent work itself is best seen as a heterogeneous group, involving many different concepts, many of them contradictory, being pushed along simultaneously."

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Among those selected for the exhibition are the sun-drenched Clam Diggers (1964), about which Mr. Hess says de Kooning seems to be looking back to Watteau or Rubens, The Visit (1967), Two Figures in a Landscape (1967), lent by the Stedelijk Museum, and more Women, in the water, in a rowboat, with a child, at Sag Harbor, singing.

"The late Women are distorted, which makes them seem Expressionist; just as I image Renoir's and Matisse's women looked Expressionist when they were new." Mr. Hess concludes, "But Expressionism includes an attitude about the outside world: its misery, its pathos, brutality, or grandeur. De Kooning looks at his environment as coolly as Cézanne; his distortions come from inside, from his art."

Photographs and additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019. 245-3200.