

“Early Abstract Expressionism: A Concern with the Unknown Within.”
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Early Abstract Expressionism: A Concern with the Unknown Within

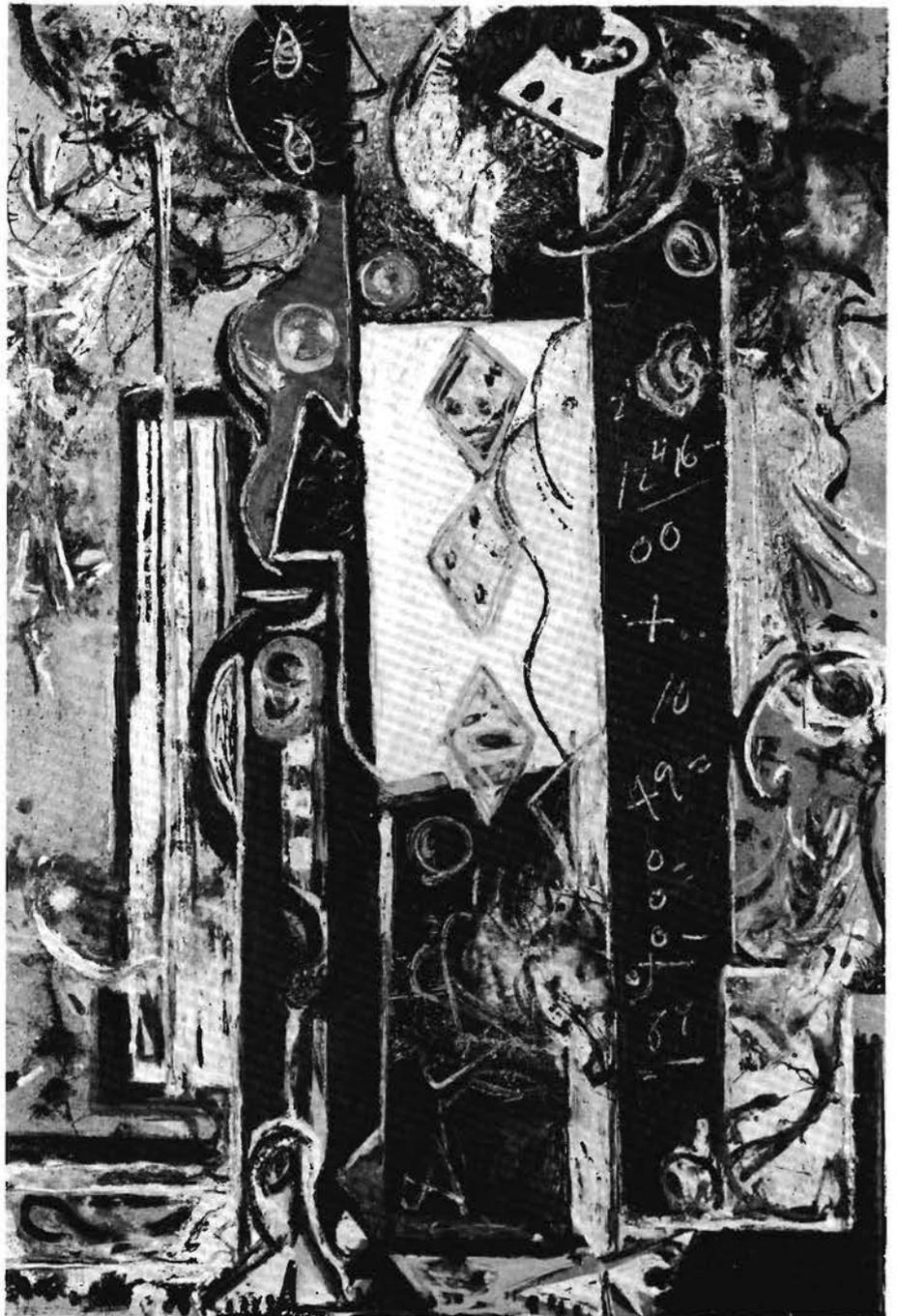
by Robert Carleton Hobbs

Breakthrough! The term “breakthrough” is often used to assess a major accomplishment of an artist, the works in which he first achieves an undeniable advance. But what does a breakthrough really signify? What does an artist leave when he begins a new style? Is he really leaving, so to speak, one room, closing and sealing the door to it when he enters another? Or is he remodeling, expanding, or merely redecorating the room in which he exists? A major intent of this essay is to look closely at the rooms occupied by the Abstract Expressionists during their formative years, the enclosures pejoratively designated Surrealist-Cubist, in order to understand exactly what sort of quarters they inhabited before their acclaimed breakthrough. Moreover, the essay will examine these spaces, the ideas expressed in them and the artistic and literary sources supporting them. It will imply ways the later style is incorporated in the earlier one, for the development of the New York painters in the late 1940s was from the complex to the simple, from an admittedly conflated ambiguity typifying their work in the late thirties and greater part of the forties to the more condensed forms that remained the distinctive characteristic of their later style. The early paintings explain the later ones: they provide the key to interpreting the significant content that preoccupied the Abstract Expressionists. As Mark Rothko said, “We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless.”¹

Between some of the earlier and later examples of these artists the real difference is the intensification certain elements receive. Jackson Pollock used drips as a final gestural overlay in *Male and Female* (fig. 1); later they became the predominating elements. In many of his early watercolors, Rothko started with a subtly variegated background that later became the sole vehicle of his art. One segment of Adolph Gottlieb’s pictographs could be regarded as the inspiration of his Bursts. By merely dropping the surrealist overtones of his early work, Clyfford Still achieved the abstractness of his later art. Willem de Kooning never really stopped painting women—he simply emphasized more and more the indeterminateness accentuating the joints and extremities of his figures of the forties. And several years before he started to paint *Elegies*, Robert Motherwell was working with verticals and ovoids. The artists represented in this exhibition did not experience what can be truly labeled a breakthrough. Instead they underwent a process of development in which they were assured their abstract shapes had meaning. Once convinced, they became increasingly abstract, more abbreviated, until the gesture and the medium itself coupled with the barest hint of a schema were sufficient.

Because Abstract Expressionism is not a movement in the sense we have come to understand vanguard groups in the twentieth century—it has no manifesto and can be bifurcated into field and gestural painters—and because the formative years witness even less cohesiveness than the later development, the overall structure housing them would not be marked by its unity. In fact, it would have less cohesiveness than an edifice denoting their shared interests in the fifties. The structure housing these diverse artists in the forties could perhaps be most clearly indicated by comparing it to a multi-chambered cave, a comparison substantiated by the mythic overtones and atavistic elements apparent in many of their paintings. The loose interconnectedness of the varied internal cavities, some joined by large tunnels, others by small rambling apertures, is analogous to the close bonds established by some Abstract Expressionists—as the rapport

1 Jackson Pollock
Male and Female, 1942
Oil on canvas, 73¼ x 49 inches
Collection of Mrs. H. Gates Lloyd



between Baziotes and Motherwell, Gottlieb and Rothko, de Kooning and Gorky, and also Krasner and Pollock—and conversely the fierce independence which others maintained, particularly Pousette-Dart, Reinhardt, and Still. All Abstract Expressionists, moreover, continuously safeguarded the autonomy of their work; but, it should be mentioned, they belonged to a cultural tradition, reinforced by their readings of philosophers like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, that advocated independence as the only legitimate pursuit for responsible individuals.

Many of these artists created paintings with a dark, haunting, chthonic quality. Clyfford Still's tenebrous surfaces are thickly worked with heavy layers of brown, black, and gray pigment. A comparison between a Still painting and a wall in a cave indicates interesting parallels in terms of rough, almost relief-like surfaces, dark fuscous colors, and vocabulary of vaguely organic shapes. To Rothko, a close friend in the mid-forties, his works suggested the Persephone myth.² Gottlieb, who emphasized dun-colored hues in his early pictographs, even used the word "Persephone" as a title for two paintings. Paralleling

Cro-Magnon man who at times, as in Altamira, affixed his identity to the walls of a cave with hand prints, Gottlieb accented one painting with black and white impressions of his hand.³ While Still and Gottlieb evoked elements of the Persephone myth, Pollock decided, upon the suggestion of James Johnson Sweeney, to rename *Moby Dick*, 1943, after the nymphomaniac wife of King Minos, Pasiphae, who according to Cretan legend descended into a cave to make love to a rumbling bull, a symbol no doubt of incipient volcanoes.⁴ By giving this title to the painting, Pollock located the concerns of his art in a subterranean realm. Through the work's marked libidinous and conflated character, he implies



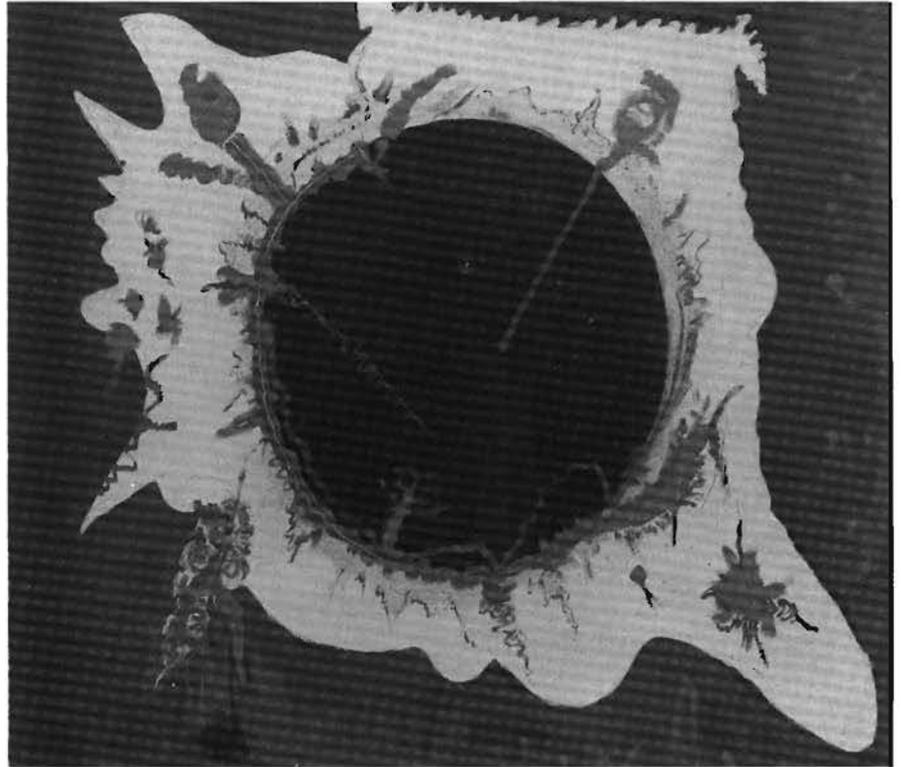
2 Jackson Pollock
Night Mist, c. 1944
Oil on canvas, 36 x 74 inches
Norton Gallery and School of Art,
West Palm Beach, Florida

an analogy between Pasiphae's lust for the bull and modern man's desire to come to terms with the chaotic darker forces within himself, his animal nature, his instincts, the id, which according to Freud can be indirectly understood in dream imagery where it escapes the censorship of the superego. In many early paintings Pollock manifested his concerns with the uncharted wilderness within. One might say *The Key* (fig. 35) stands at the threshold of this terrain; *Night Mist* (fig. 2) dimly surveys its atmosphere, while *Male and Female* (fig. 1) provides an understanding of ambiguous hybrids inhabiting it.

Many early Abstract Expressionists' works reflect a journey within. These generally tonal paintings, often characterized by a crepuscular light, suggest the twilight world of dreams. Motherwell's painting *The Homely Protestant (Bust)* (fig. 98), with its dark ochre color and figure defined with sgraffito markings, alludes to dimly-lit walls of caves. The diapered pattern in the background resembles ancient petroglyphs; the figure seems to be formed from undulations on a cave's wall, while red skeletal parts appear to have been rubbed on with a stick. The shapes that look as if they are part of the geological conformation of the cave's wall collaborate with drawn forms to suggest that what is presented in the painting is analogous to what one finds in the far recesses of the mind. With their skeletal fish forms and ritualistic rocks, Theodoros Stamos's early canvases point to a prehistoric event. Unlike most Abstract Expressionists, he continued in the tradition of Arthur Dove; only the light in his paintings is nocturnal, and the secrets he unravels are those of the rocks he penetrates.⁵ Fascinated by the evolutionary cycle, he looked to stones as talismans, as inverted Rosettas whose secrets are locked inside, not inscribed on the surface. Barnett Newman's

Pagan Void (fig. 3) appropriately symbolizes the unconscious world as a black amoebic shape enclosing a ritualistic spear and a tiny flagellum, perhaps a biomorphic conflation of primitive archetypes with the fecundity of sexual imagery. William Baziotes seemed to turn his interior world into a primordial aquarium. Or else his realm resembles a piece of amber painted by a Venetian artist—amber encasing abstract figures which are evocative of the mysterious tonalities of another explorer of the internal frontier Edgar Allan Poe. In his paintings and watercolors Rothko veiled his hybrids in an atmosphere reflective of an underwater environment, keeping them diffuse, fluctuant, and

3 Barnett Newman
Pagan Void, 1946
 Oil on canvas, 33 x 38 inches
 Collection of Annalee Newman



fluid to suggest rather than describe and to circumscribe not delineate his content. Regarding art as a religious or mystical experience, Richard Pousette-Dart often speaks of the edge, which connotes a narrow precipice separating the known from the unknown:

*I want to keep a balance just on the edge of awareness, the narrow rim between the conscious and sub-conscious, a balance between expanding and contracting, silence and sound.*⁶

Characteristically in his early paintings, line is diffused into an aura that surrounds figures without separating them from their ambience. The entire painting becomes a vibrating surface in which figures and fields are confluent, and the ensuing heavy atmosphere bespeaks an interior realm. Moreover his hieratic figures reside in a twilight atmosphere; the flecks of jewel-like colors peering out of a black network appear to have been lit by a flickering torch. Ad Reinhardt appropriately defined his territory in the title to a painting of 1941, *Dark Symbol* (fig. 120). Predominately in the forties his terrain was an abstracted version of a Chinese landscape, rendered in saturated hues subtly diffused over the surfaces of his canvases. In his art there is a hermetic, secretive quality evidenced in dark tones and subtle nuances of paint. Formally, his works belong with early Abstract Expressionism even though Reinhardt separated himself from the attitudes that intrigued so many of his peers. He viewed art as a tautology and found the Abstract Expressionist emphasis on angst-ridden brushstrokes melodramatic. Perhaps, his position can be most clearly elucidated if one regards him as both a participant and the conscience of Abstract Expressionism, who pursued in painting what he rejected in words.

Some Abstract Expressionists during the forties painted compositions reflective of sun-drenched regions. But these bright tableaux look more like a secret ritual suddenly caught in mid-action by bright rays of sunlight—as if one has suddenly switched on the lights to a private orgy—than they do scenes whose normal arenas are sunny coastlands along the Mediterranean. Crouching low in the grass, Arshile Gorky found a world teeming with insects and plant life, which he turned into hybrids.⁷ In his garden of delights, bones foliate botanical extremities and flowers sport proboscises. Briefly suspending his predominant concerns with landscapes and still lifes, Hans Hofmann flirted occasionally in the



4 Hans Hofmann
Palimpsest, 1946
 Oil on board, 39½ x 59½ inches
 Andre Emmerich Gallery, New York, and
 the Estate of Hans Hofmann

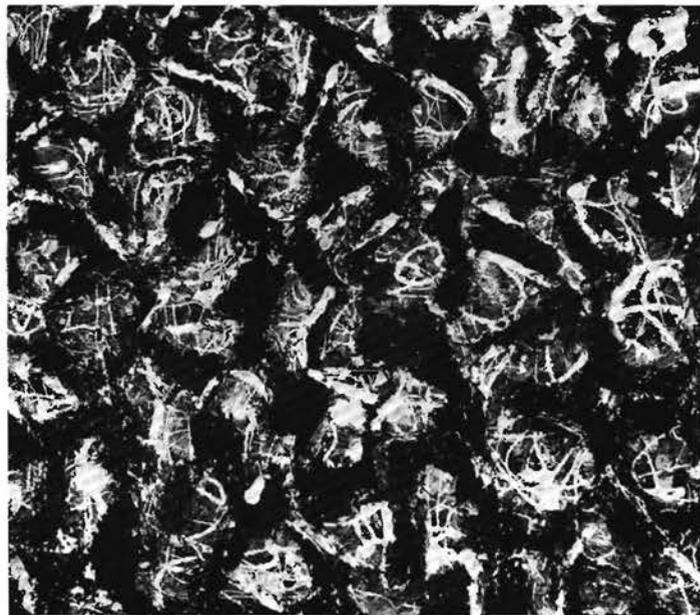
forties with an interior world, a world at times noted for riotous explosions of color and frenzied bacchanalia of paint as well as other times—in *Palimpsest* (fig. 4) for example—a world characterized by a mysterious undercurrent.

The struggle to come to terms with the dimensions of one's own room, its style and special flavor, is epitomized in Lee Krasner's work of the forties. After meeting Pollock, Krasner began to approach painting as a meditational experience: she has termed it a move from Hofmann's exterior cubist nature to Pollock's "I am nature."⁸ From approximately 1943 to 1946 she consistently ended up with gray slabs, sometimes two and three inches thick. These gray paintings resulted from her attempts to find "the image," by which term she most likely means an intuitively conceived composition that would accord with her own internal nature. Usually destroyed, the gray paintings remind one of frustrations facing a Zen initiate who attempts to grasp intuition rationally. Finally, after several years of sustained difficulty, Krasner stormed the Bastille of her own rationality and evolved her Little Image series where nontranslatable hieroglyphs suggest a preconscious language, free and indeterminate, before it has assumed the stability of articulated thought. Her efforts—more perhaps than that of any of her peers—resemble a breakthrough, and yet a comparison of her Little Images such as *Abstract #2* (fig. 6) with works of the late thirties (fig. 5)

5 Lee Krasner
Untitled, 1938
Oil on paper, 19 x 24¾ inches
Collection of the artist



6 Lee Krasner
Abstract #2, 1946-48
Oil on canvas, 20½ x 23¼ inches
Collection of the artist



reveals amazing similarities, thus denying a complete renunciation of her earlier style. The change occurring between her work of the late thirties and the Little Image series involves getting rid of presuppositions regarding the nature of art and allowing improvisation and intuition to guide her through her own distillations.

Like Krasner's coming to terms with her own creative space, the Abstract Expressionists' acceptance of their own temperaments—which were usually expressed in styles reflective of the general modernist current—was for the most part an intuitive and individual enterprise. However, they were greatly aided in their endeavors by their interests in primitive and archaic art, which then seemed to exemplify an externalization of the internal sphere. Or as John Graham, a mentor in the thirties and early forties for many of these artists, thought: *The purpose of art in particular is to re-establish a lost contact with the unconscious . . . with the primordial racial past and to keep and develop this contact in order to bring to the conscious mind the throbbing events of the unconscious mind.*⁹

Moreover, he believed that the unconscious was most apparent in primitive art.¹⁰ Unlike many modernist groups, the Abstract Expressionists did not use primitive forms simply to enrich an overly refined Western tradition. Like the Surrealists,

theirs was a primitivism of the subconscious;¹¹ only their approach was more thoroughgoing and eschewed the clever humor of so many surrealist works for a serious tone and rigidly ethnical approach. Differing from Mondrian (whom they admired) and his followers in the American Abstract Artists group, they disbelieved in modern utopias. Their search for universals manifested itself in their desire to put themselves in touch with instincts and was abetted by studies of primitive art. In a fundamental sense, the early Abstract Expressionists can be regarded as initiators of a post-modernist movement.

Because of the nature of some exhibitions held at the Museum of Modern Art during the thirties and early forties, it was hardly necessary for artists to go uptown to the American Museum of Natural History to view tribal artifacts. Among the exhibitions emphasizing primitive art were the following: “American Sources of Modern Art,” 1933, which included examples from Aztec, Mayan, and Incan cultures; “African Negro Art,” 1935; “Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa,” 1937; “Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art,” 1940; and “Indian Art of the United States,” 1941. While these exhibitions were few in number when compared to those devoted to modern art and its antecedents in the nineteenth century, several were among the most important of the period.

“Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art” included more objects than perhaps any exhibition to be staged at the museum. By surveying the broad spectrum of artistic activity from its early flowering to the twentieth century with a comprehensiveness bordering on the encyclopedic, this exhibition implied that the origins of the Mexican mural movement could be found on American soil. It tacitly suggested that the way for artists in the United States to achieve a distinctly original style was to look first to their own indigenous roots and then to transform them into a modern idiom. A way out of the dilemma of how to be modern, original, and American as well as how to use European vanguardist innovations without being stifled by them was exemplified in the work of Mexican muralists Orozco and Rivera. In 1940 it was thought that the triumph of North American painting had already occurred—but in Mexico, not the United States, and the Mexican show represented a straightforward admission of how far Mexico had outdistanced New York aesthetically. For Jackson Pollock, who regarded Orozco’s murals at Pomona College as among the most important paintings of the century¹² and worked in the late thirties with Siqueiros, such an exhibition was most likely of great importance.

“Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa,” 1937, was of inestimable value, for it translated cave and rock paintings to a smaller, two-dimensional format, thus making them available to New York painters. Facsimiles of pictures, with their randomly ordered compositions and textured surfaces, suggested possibilities for experimentation to New York painters. Pollock’s *Wounded Animal*, 1943 (fig. 7), bears an astonishing likeness to one picture in this show, number 38, which depicts in the Franco-Cantabrian style a speared bison from a cave in northern Spain. If one were to make a generalization regarding the overall look of early Abstract Expressionism, the seemingly casual overlay and interpenetration of shapes are strikingly similar to the cave painter’s lack of interest in compositional effects and reliance on chance to give any sense of order. Textured surfaces created by scumbling, dripping, smearing, and dragging paint over the canvas or alternating between wet and dry brush effects as well as gouging paper in watercolors¹³ simulate roughly formed walls of caves, or even peeling plaster of aged frescoes. Many Abstract Expressionists’ attitudes may have been reinforced by this exhibition, but some painters, particularly Baziotes, de Kooning, Gorky, and Rothko, were intrigued by the Metropolitan Museum’s Pompeian frescoes from which they gleaned stylistic characteristics similar to those encouraged by prehistoric rock pictures. Some artists who did not view the exhibition were also imbued with atavism. For example, Motherwell, who was not in New York when this exhibition was being shown, has long felt his art has an affinity with cave paintings as well as with prehistoric dolmens and megaliths. When he visited Spain in 1958, it is worth mentioning, one of his most moving experiences was touring the caves at



7 Jackson Pollock
Wounded Animal, 1943
Oil and plaster on canvas, 38 x 30 inches
Collection of Thomas B. Hess

Altamira by candlelight.¹⁴

For the 1941 exhibition on American Indian art a large facsimile, 12½ by 60 feet, of pictographs, made by members of the Basketmaker culture of Barrier Canyon, Utah, was commissioned. This picture is portentous of the enlarged scale of some Abstract Expressionist paintings of the late forties, even though it is much larger than anything attempted by them. It may, however, have had an immediate impact on Pousette-Dart who chose to cover a few large pieces of canvas in the early forties with figures, which are generalized statements on primitivism. But he eschewed the random order of this facsimile for a more structured grid pattern that ultimately originates in Cubism.¹⁵ Surprisingly this facsimile was most likely unimportant to Gottlieb, who is often credited with an interest in Indian pictographs. According to Esther Gottlieb, the artist's widow, he was not exposed to them in the late thirties when he lived in Arizona.¹⁶ Even if he saw the exhibition in 1941 at the Museum of Modern Art and was fascinated with this life-sized facsimile, his art does not develop from it. His grid pattern, but not his paint texture and colors, which are reflective of primitive art in general, was derived from Italian medieval panel painting¹⁷ as well as, of course, the art of Mondrian and perhaps that of Torres García. But the definition of pictographs contained in the catalogue may have been important, for it stresses their mysterious qualities, an attitude congruent with Gottlieb's approach.

Petroglyphs and pictographs and also American Indian art in general were greatly admired in the forties. On a trip to the West in spring 1947, Stamos made a point of visiting ancient Indian petroglyphs. Pollock was intrigued by Navaho sand painting; and in the late thirties and early forties he read late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Reports of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. For years Newman spoke movingly of the meandering Miami Indian mounds in Ohio and felt a great affinity to what he regarded as the primitive's terror of the unknowable.¹⁸ Later in the forties, he even wrote forewords to catalogues accompanying exhibitions of American Indian (1946) as well as Precolumbian art (1944) at Betty Parsons Gallery.

In the early forties, the Abstract Expressionists had only a generalized and incomplete understanding of European developments. Looking at *Cahiers d'Art*, reading books by Herbert Read, Alfred Barr, Jr., Amédée Ozenfant, and John Graham, attending exhibitions both at galleries and museums, the Abstract Expressionists studied motifs and styles but had only a second-hand account of the culture in which these abstract forms exhibit meaning. One might say that before the second half of the forties they had excellent renditions of the opera constituting modern painting but only fragmentary copies of the libretto. Representative of the data circulated in the forties are catalogues produced for exhibitions at Curt Valentin's Buchholz Gallery. In these catalogues brief translated excerpts of artists' writings are included as forewords, which tantalize without expressing in depth attitudes toward modern art. Exhibitions as the important "Cubism and Abstract Art" and "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism" at the Museum of Modern Art in 1936 and 1936-37 respectively served as broad summaries of European vanguard art and emphasized more the similarities than the differences between various European factions. To New York both before and during the war came renowned European artists: Bauhaus professors Josef Albers and Lyonel Feininger; Surrealists André Breton, Max Ernst, Matta, and Yves Tanguy; Purist Amédée Ozenfant; Cubist Fernand Léger; Constructivist Naum Gabo; and Neo-plasticist Piet Mondrian. But their appearance did not serve to emphasize the diverseness of various approaches to abstract painting, because European artists found in the United States that their common bond of being immigrants superseded their differences. On the whole Abstract Expressionists did not frequently associate with European artists; the two groups belonged to different social strata. Of course, a few did become friends with some European artists but the effect, excepting for Gorky who was received into the Surrealist camp, was diffuse and generally unaccompanied by conversions of Abstract Expressionists to specific styles of European painting. Even Gorky, an

acknowledged surrealist, continued to paint in a manner as reflective of Kandinsky as it was of Miró.

Even though they playfully shadowboxed with them, the Abstract Expressionists regarded European artists as spiritual allies, who had already won important victories for abstract art. On the whole they did not regard European modernist endeavors as a threat. Troubling to them was the parochialism of American art, the ascendancy of regionalism and social realism in the thirties and consequent subservience of painting to chauvinistic and ideological aims.

From their sojourns to galleries and museums, Abstract Expressionists brought back motifs: black and white from *Guernica*, cubist infrastructure from Analytic Cubism, surrealist hybrids from André Masson and Joan Miró, Mondrian's grid, Kandinsky's broad washes, and Klee's squiggling biomorphic notations. When they painted, they used these motifs freely (without the stylistic constraints imposed on them by their originators) to create an art with a different focus.¹⁹ Some motifs were chewed up and then spit out, others were thoroughly digested forming a background to new activities.

In themselves the motifs were important only as signposts marking a journey already taken, signaling for Abstract Expressionists a trail they would have to forge for themselves. American painters felt the momentousness of modern European painting; they intuited that unutterable poetic quality designating all great art, and yet were relatively unacquainted with the cultures making such works possible. They understood that this art was not simply a formalist endeavor, that it had subjects indirectly arrived at and seemed to embody feelings more directly than realistic painting. And so they decided to create an art in which significant meanings inhered in an abstract format. James Johnson Sweeney described a similar approach in his catalogue essay accompanying the Miró exhibition, 1941, at the Museum of Modern Art. This exhibition and its catalogue were important to early Abstract Expressionism. On the first page Sweeney affirmed Miró's primacy both in painting and in poetry. To corroborate his assertion he included the following quotation by Miró: *What really counts is to strip the soul naked. Painting or poetry is made as we make love; a total embrace, prudence thrown to the wind, nothing held back. . . . Have you ever heard of greater nonsense than the aims of the abstractionist group? And they invite me to share their deserted house as if the signs that I transcribe on a canvas, at the moment when they correspond to a concrete representation of my mind, were not profoundly real, and did not belong essentially to the world of reality! As a matter of fact, I am attaching more and more importance to the subject matter of my work. To me it seems vital that a rich and robust theme should be present to give the spectator an immediate blow between the eyes before a second thought can interpose. In this way poetry pictorially expressed speaks its own language. . . . For a thousand men of letters, give me one poet!*²⁰

What the Abstract Expressionists hoped to create was a poetic art that did not smack of literary allusions but that did contain personal symbols and a method of application manifesting complex states of feeling, inklings of preconscious and unconscious contents of the mind.

In this habitat of early Abstract Expressionism walls and roofs are well supported with strong underpinnings of taking one's self on faith so that rumblings from beneath the earth, intuitions of activities in subterranean realms, would only cause tremors not disruptive shakings of the foundations. Some artists, like Jackson Pollock, however, were closer to the lava flow and felt each rumble and shift with more force so their paintings seem to echo vibrations of cataclysmic eruptions. Others, like Mark Rothko, further removed from the actual disturbances, were aware but not overwhelmed by them and brooded over the tragedy of man's fate in a suggestively evocative, deliberately ambiguous tonal poetry.

Within his area of self-imposed isolation, each early Abstract Expressionist began to listen to directives from within, or at least to whisperings he may well

have thought came from himself. The structure that was early Abstract Expressionism seems to have contained a barely audible Muzak that repeated unceasingly the words “unconscious,” “atavism,” “myth,” “action,” “sublime,” “indirection,” and “content” until the artists heard these messages and supposed they came from within. Each may have felt he arrived at this point individually, but many admonitions of artists, critics, and historians of the twenties and thirties suggested the way. If one takes time to retrace steps made by the Abstract Expressionists, investigate their libraries, and query them about important books, exhibitions, and conversations, it is apparent that wherever they turned, they found the direction leading to an investigation of the unconscious and to a way of painting in which the means would constitute part of the meaning of their work. The working method of the Surrealists, psychic automatism, became an initiatory procedure for many Abstract Expressionists since it provided them with a concrete way of approaching improvisation and hopefully rigging traps to bait preconscious contents. Also Cubism provided a rational compositional structure, a grid suitable for enclosing hybrid forms that, for the Abstract Expressionists, were embodiments of feelings and intimations of understanding.

In her book *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning*, Dore Ashton mentions that some Abstract Expressionists experimented with psychic automatist techniques as early as the late thirties.²¹ And certainly, as the recent exhibition at Rutgers University has pointed out, Surrealism in the United States was an important mode of thinking for artists even in the early thirties.²² Perhaps the most authoritative documents on Surrealism and its concerns with the unconscious are the *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* exhibition catalogue with essays by Georges Hugnet and Herbert Read’s catalogue *Surrealism*, 1936. In addition to its cogent text allying Surrealism with Romanticism and the individual and placing it in opposition to Classicism and the group, Read’s book contains texts by André Breton, Hugh Sykes Davies, Paul Eluard, and Georges Hugnet. In both catalogues, it is worth emphasizing, Surrealism is not presented from a strictly doctrinaire point of view: it is considered the newest development of a basic way of approaching the world, the way of the isolated individual who views truth in a subjective as opposed to an objective fashion. Virtually regarded as required reading also were Herbert Read’s general books on history and theory, particularly *The Meaning of Art*, 1931, and *Art and Society*, 1937, which stressed the unconscious as a most fecund path for artists to follow. The clearest and most succinct definition of psychic automatism in English is given in Nicolas Calas’s book *Confound the Wise*, 1942, and the date of this book’s publication convincingly establishes it as an important source for emerging Abstract Expressionism:

I distinguish three types of automatism, first poetic automatism such as the one used by Chirico and Dali in their Surrealist period. This automatism is purely psychological as it is built on the dream pattern. Next comes objective automatism in which it is the invisible forms in a stain that are turned into a picture. Invisible form is the environmental counterpart of the unconscious and the process through which the image comes into existence, scratching or rubbing creates effects of objective hazard that is to the stain what automatism is to the dream; the driving force, that from invisibility and unconsciousness leads through free association, to consciousness and discovery. Between these two extreme forms there is a third one, physiological automatism. It was first developed in sculpture by Hans Arp. In physiological automatism the automatic factor is in the free movement of the agent, the arm and hand. When Arp or Tanguy create their forms one has the impression that the objects have been produced by a rhythmic movement of the arm and hand. The early scribbles of a child are also the result of automatic movement of the pencil and the hand on the paper but they are spasmodic instead of being harmonious; they are interrupted by such obstacles as weakness of the hand and lack of attention. The shapes in Miro’s and Tanguy’s pictures or in Arp’s sculpture are the product of

*an attention that is used to protect the free development of physiological movement from interruptions and that is why the forms and images thus created look, although they are purely imaginary, as if they were alive. They are biomorphic as opposed to the geometric forms Brancusi excels in using. There is no automatism in Brancusi because he illustrates ideas the way Klee often does in painting.*²³

It is of interest to note that also in 1942 Matta, Motherwell, and Baziotes were proselytizing the merits of psychic automatism. They contacted and then discussed this method with Jackson Pollock, Hans Hofmann, Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, Peter Busa, and Gerome Kamrowaki with the specific aim of holding an exhibition at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century to show up the Surrealists as deviating from the original premises laid down by Breton in his 1924 manifesto and consequently to present a more valid, less literary form of Surrealism.²⁴ Although the exhibition never took place because Matta did not want to give up his position with the Surrealists, and also because the Americans were such individualists, the dissemination of surrealist ideas, which had been around for over a decade, and the emphasis they received as a method for reaching deeper levels of the self were important elements in the formative phase of Abstract Expressionism.

Cubist ideas likewise had been around and for a longer period of time than surrealist ones. American avant-garde artists even in the teens of this century had become deft adherents of Cubism. Perhaps the reason why a cubist syntax was used by so many Abstract Expressionists during the forties is that they simply could not get away from it and, furthermore, probably did not want to. The cubist grid provided a basic modernist vocabulary while Surrealism supplied a working method; the two combined to form basic tools that were determinant without being constraining. Cubism provided a means for structuring even the most inchoate doodles occurring from psychic automatist procedures; and, more importantly, it was fluctuant enough to provide a needed indeterminacy.

When Clement Greenberg remarked that Abstract Expressionism continued Analytical Cubism into the realm of nonobjectivity—the avenue Picasso and Braque refrained from taking—his statement contained the gratuity of a missing piece in a jigsaw puzzle that had been so firmly locked in place that no one questioned its validity.²⁵ But his description is simply morphological and did not take into consideration the significance of their imagery. Differing from Cubists, Abstract Expressionists were not interested in the visual world. Their main concerns—as they have explicated them in interviews, lectures, and random notes—were to penetrate the world within themselves and to paint new objects, their feelings about the world rather than the world itself.²⁶ Their perception of the outside world was useful only as a metaphor directing the viewer to the concept of an interior landscape. To them Cubism represented only one style among many and was especially useful because it was synonymous with modernity. Their use of the cubist syntax was usually for structural articulation, not as an investigatory tool in itself. De Kooning consistently remained close to Cubism, but even in his most cubist works he avoids precise grids, choosing instead curvilinear whiplashes or implicit structures resulting from superimposition of numerous cut and torn sketches. In his abstract works the cubist grid holds in place and provides a rationale for abrupt transitions caused by his overlapping sketches of anatomical parts. The cessation of one form and its abrupt transition into another in paintings as *Mailbox* (fig. 8) would become incoherent without the background of Cubism. But the cubist infrastructure was not used as a way of analyzing reality, which had already been torn apart and recombined by him; it stood rather as a graph or blueprint under which various shapes were subsumed. So schooled was Pousette-Dart in the language of Cubism that each time he began a new work in the forties, he started with a cubist armature, which he in turn proceeded to destroy with heavy coruscations of paint. His finished works resembled not so much Cubism as something distinctly different from it. Hovering, vibrating presences in his

completed works appear as something slightly out of focus, something existing on the periphery of vision.

Differing from Cubists, Abstract Expressionists forsook the analysis of the world outside them to emphasize subjects suggestive of interior states. And differing also from some Surrealists, they chose not to picture unconscious terrains with the clarity of a nineteenth-century academic painting.

Even when Abstract Expressionists painted landscapes, they turned them into “inscapes,” to use Gerard Manley Hopkins’s term that was often used in the forties by Matta. They painted interiors, usually subterranean realms or else,

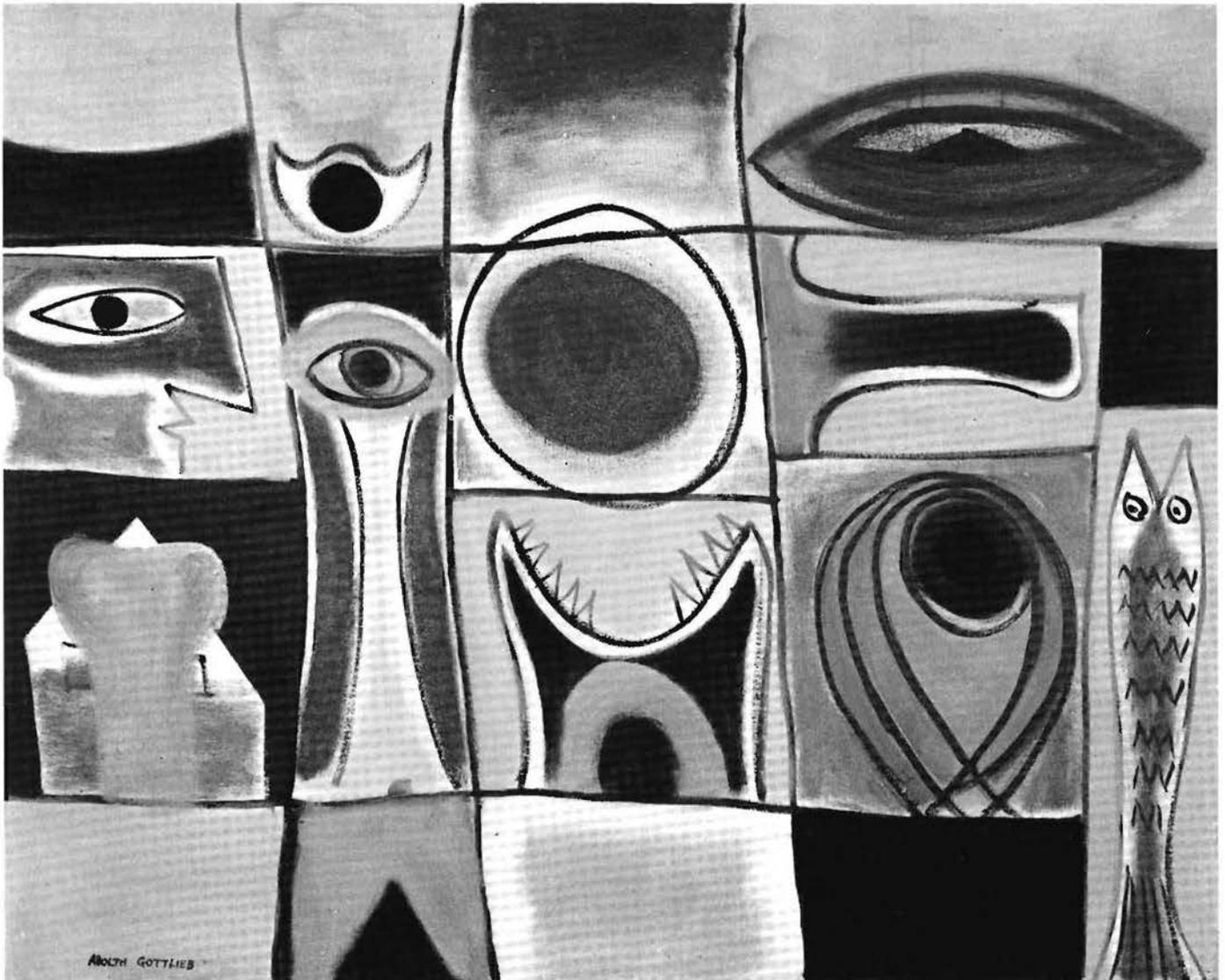


8 Willem de Kooning
Mailbox, 1948
Oil, enamel, and charcoal on paper pasted
on cardboard, 23¼ x 30 inches
Private collection

in the case of Gorky, used the landscape as a metaphor for the “anatomical blackboard” within. In his Journals Hopkins employed “inscape” at times to indicate an interior but more often to designate an indefinable poetic quality of a landscape or work of art. “Inscape” of something for Hopkins means the self of something. “Inscape” labels great art’s uniqueness, its capacity to turn in on itself—consequently its inwardness—and to present a viewer with its essential identity. The inscape of a poem directs one toward language’s sonority, which encourages one to dwell on sounds and rhythms rather than turning to interpretations of the text. Thus the inscape of a real landscape would be presented in a poem via sounds and rhythms rather than direct visual description. And in the case of painting “inscape” defines a viewer’s distinct awareness and enjoyment of subtle colors and harmonious shapes in great compositions so that his delight in the visual panoply before him discourages him from relinquishing the sensuous surface to look for ulterior meanings. With the Abstract Expressionists, the primary emphasis was also on the qualitative unity

of the work. Although the painters were concerned with meaning, they wished to present subject matter in terms that would not obviate a painting's importance, turning it into mere illustration.

For example, Adolph Gottlieb consistently reminded viewers that the symbols employed in his pictographs did not have a referent external to the painting. He was not creating, he would emphasize, hieroglyphs whose meaning could be discerned by checking motifs in a dictionary of symbols.²⁷ He wished—and this is important for all of the Abstract Expressionists—to give the semblance of meaning but not specific symbols which could be deciphered and



9 Adolph Gottlieb
Forgotten Dream, 1946
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches
Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art,
Ithaca, New York; Gift of Albert A. List

rationally explained in verbal terms. His main concern was with those meanings communicable through painting, that is, through visual perception. Since the composition is usually an all-over one, the viewer's attempts to find a point of focus is thwarted. One can focus on only two grids at any one time: in looking for a length of time, one sees first one pair of grids, then another pair comes into focus, and later still others. Psychologically, when one gazes at a pictograph, one has the distinct feeling the painting mirrors what the looking glass reflects in Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror* (fig. 108): an interior state as opposed to an external countenance. In other words, in looking at a pictograph—and again this experience is true for almost all early Abstract Expressionist works—one is somehow gazing into a magical mirror that permits one to look deeply within oneself. The work of art is a palimpsest—Freud's magic writing tablet—a mirror of the self in the act of becoming aware of itself. The activity is analogous to

meditation when one looks within in a relaxed state so that images seem to come to one of their own volition, without one's willing them. In Gottlieb's pictographs the asymmetrical grid creates the effect of an overall unity, a simple gestalt, but the individual forms within compete with the grid for attention. Consequently, the grid's rationality is denied by the symbols it contains, and its "good" gestalt is superseded by fluctuant images. Also figures in individual compartments are accented in such a manner that no one segment nor any one shape stamps itself out on the mind of the viewer. It is important to reiterate that in a successful Gottlieb pictograph one's eyes do not naturally move to any one focus. Focus is broken up into numerous foci, thereby forcing the viewer to shift focus and thus peripherally scan the painting.

Peripheral vision usually refers to unfocused vision, but it also, as in the case of looking at Gottlieb's pictographs, can designate the indirect vision predominating with constantly shifting foci. Between the viewer's shifting from focal point to focal point, there are subliminal instants when his vision is out of focus and thereby peripheral. This is one type of peripheral vision. The other occurs when one stands before a large canvas and the total view is out of focus.

This characteristic of shifting foci alternating with peripheral vision, with the resultant effect being an emphasis on the peripheral image, is a major designating element of Abstract Expressionism during its formative years and continues as a crucial factor in the later painting. For the most part the Abstract Expressionists were consciously unaware of the emphasis they placed on peripheral vision. Their proclaimed concerns with the unconscious as the most relevant territory for investigation, their knowledge that it is by definition inaccessible, and their efforts to trap aspects of the preconscious through improvisatory procedures, particularly psychic automatism, led them to look at the world in a different way. Instead of attempting to study nature with the rational stare of academic realism or with the sweeping but studied glance of Impressionism, they tended to emphasize the world which they found out of the corner of their eyes, the blurred, conflated image of peripheral vision. Intuitively they arrived at this type of vision as an analogy to those contents of the mind that shrink from the gaze of consciousness. In other words their emphasis on shapes approximate to peripheral vision served as a visual analogue to the preconscious or perhaps even to the unconscious mind.

Anton Ehrenzweig, in his essay "Cézanne and Peripheral Vision" contained in his book *The Psycho-analysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing: An Introduction to a Theory of Unconscious Perception*, 1953, hypothesizes that the stratification of the mind into conscious and unconscious may well have its origin in the physiological structure of vision. While closely packed central cone cells permit focused vision, surrounding and less populous rod cells allow for a blurred grasp of the periphery; the former serves as an analogue for the narrow lens of consciousness and the latter for the diffuse and unfocused preconscious or unconscious. Ehrenzweig allies peripheral vision with unconscious perception by pointing out that rod cells are vastly superior to cones in only one situation, twilight. He then buttresses this fact with the observation that one often experiences split-second hallucinations with vision occurring in dark places (scotopic vision) when focusing cone cells are ineffectual. The frightening projections under these crepuscular conditions, according to Ehrenzweig, demonstrate the close relations between peripheral vision and the subconscious, or between radiating rods and dream images. Because with peripheral vision one sees only a somewhat undifferentiated space, one senses he or she has intuited or simply felt the presence of an object rather than seen it. Ehrenzweig's in-depth psychological research into the way man perceives indicates a possible physiological basis for what to the Abstract Expressionists must have been an instinctive and generally unacknowledged metaphor. Attitudes of some Abstract Expressionists having a direct bearing on this subject concern their insistence that their paintings be exhibited under dim lighting.²⁸ They probably intuited the peripheral nature of their imagery and recognized that the apparitional

character of some of their art was more convincing in darkened galleries.

William Baziotēs was one of the few Abstract Expressionists to indicate his concerns with peripheral vision. While his statement was made in the fifties, it is worth quoting because it does relate to his work of the forties:

Suppose I deliberately look at the Hudson River at night—that is, the boats, the moving water, the buildings across the river, and the lights flickering, I go home with these impressions in my mind and start painting. Later on, however, during the painting, I might realize that what was just to the side of me, say a street lamp, a tree, a bench, and a man sitting there, attracted me more than anything else. I don't make any deliberate attempt to find subject matter. Certain things that go on around me make very strong impressions on me; impressions I might not be completely aware of at first.²⁹

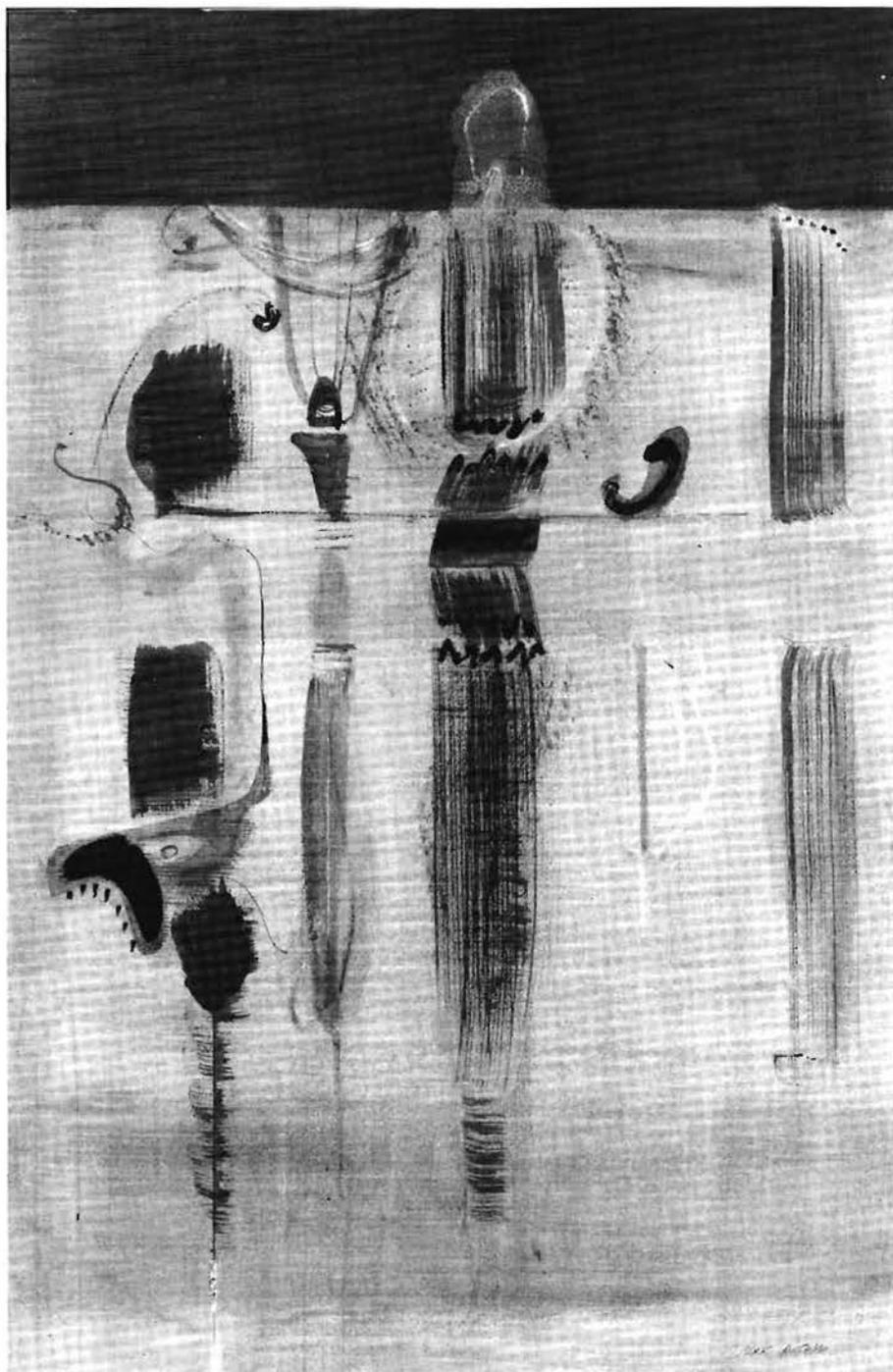
Ehrenzweig's ideas provide a key to the unity characterizing early Abstract Expressionist endeavors. At this point one might cavil, "the work of painters as different as Pollock and Baziotēs cannot be subsumed under a common stylistic category." But if one considers that these artists were concerned with the unconscious, had read Freud and Jung, aspired, as Rothko indicated, to be the most modern and the most ancient at the same time, consistently refrained from literary anecdotal works, and persistently maintained the significance of their designately abstract endeavors, then one can begin to formulate the underpinnings of the movement. Their atavistic subject matter points in the direction of the primitive whom they supposed resided somewhere within modern man, perhaps in his unconscious mind. Their use of an imagery approximate to peripheral vision indicates, in perceptual terms, their concern with that which lies on the edge of consciousness. And their incipient iconography of improvisatory gestures coupled with pentimenti stylistically reinforces their interests in the unconscious, which is assumed to disgorge some of its content in dreams where images—similar to those in their paintings—collide, conflate, and fade in a most indeterminate space. Together atavistic subject matter, peripheral imagery, and improvisatory gestures as well as pentimenti unify the aims of the Abstract Expressionists, providing on various levels reinforcement of their psychological interests. The artists eschewed the articulating tendency of the mind, the backbone of gestalt psychology, for a more free-flowing, instinctual attitude. They avoided precise, compact shapes, choosing instead vague and often inarticulate forms reflective of true retinal images as opposed to the selected images of which the perceiver is conscious.

Abstract Expressionism deals with peripheral vision, with the "fringe," the word William James used to designate psychic overtones—a "suffusion" of "relations and objects but dimly perceived." Objects lose their specificity and become part of a field of conflated and/or suffused forms. Most of the paintings evidence ragged or bleeding edges. The vision, which is early Abstract Expressionism, conjures up the twilight of reason, the dimly-lit threshold between consciousness and unconsciousness known as the preconscious, so that peripheral vision is expressive of preconscious terrain.

The dispersed all-over quality of some early Abstract Expressionist paintings works perceptually in a fluctuant manner. The works encourage a constant shifting of focus, a visual play between alternating segments, and create a sensation of unrest, of perpetual activity. There is also another type of dynamism in these works, a directional movement imparting a continuous sense of Becoming. And the sense of Becoming is reinforced in literal terms by pentimenti in the paintings.

Peripheral vision renders something one knows without seeing it directly, something one knows only by looking out the corners of one's eyes. All one sees is a massing of forms, vaguely suggestive of known elements. The more one stares at Pollock's *Water Figure* (fig. 12), for example, the less one knows about the figure. Looking at an early Abstract Expressionist painting is unlike studying a blurred photograph in which one can vaguely comprehend some forms and guess at others. In an Abstract Expressionist work, the forms—even when

10 Mark Rothko
Vessels of Magic, 1946
Watercolor on paper, 38¾ x 25¾ inches
The Brooklyn Museum, New York



looked at directly—are almost always on the periphery. In them there is a certain built-in ambiguity. Try as one might with *Water Figure*, one simply cannot get closer to understand the full articulation of the figure. The same situation appears in many other Abstract Expressionist paintings in which vagueness, lack of definition, and merging of figure and background are the rule rather than the exception. In Rothko's *Vessels of Magic* (fig. 10), forms are veiled; they do not exist on a one-to-one basis with any known object. In early Abstract Expressionism indeterminants remain indeterminate; obscurities continue to be obscure.

As with Impressionism in which the painters' distinctly new element is in the realm of visual perception, light broken up into its prismatic colors and line conceived optically, so with Abstract Expressionism, innovations are to be found in designated visual terms, only the discovery is scotopic. No Impressionist, except possibly Monet, consistently used broken color to suggest light in the majority of his work: in reality only a few exemplify the rigors of the movement.

Similarly with Abstract Expressionism, many works are unconcerned with images reflective of scotopia. Some, however, are. And even more importantly the overall impetus of Abstract Expressionism points in this direction. These artists in the late thirties and forties often paint a twilight world in terms of a scanning vision. The focus is diffused in favor of an all-over or sequential composition. In his book Ehrenzweig points to a few of these characteristics as distinguishing traits of modern art. He remarks that modern painting, starting with Cézanne and Picasso, has relinquished good gestalts for fluid, fluctuant, and unfocused compositions, with an emphasis on superimposition of shapes rather than juxtaposition of forms. It would seem to follow that these characteristics, which are also among the distinguishing qualities of early Abstract Expressionism as I have posited it here, would tend to deny the innovations I am describing. But with the early Abstract Expressionists it is important to stress that peripheral vision is reinforced by subject matter and stylistic concerns: an iconography of the unconscious that includes primitivistic forms as well as pentimenti and the look of spontaneity. Also some early Abstract Expressionists, as Rothko, Newman, Stamos, and Still, generally encourage a scotopic reading of their works by employing subdued tones. Others, particularly Krasner, Pollock, and Reinhardt, paint in terms of highly saturated hues mainly of the same value which contend with one another for the viewer's attention, thus canceling out the power of any one hue and consequently stressing a peripheral reading. To focus on these highly saturated pigments for any length of time is troubling to the eyes: for relief one views the picture sequentially in terms of scanning and refocusing, an act which discourages focused concentration and encourages free association. The importance of early Abstract Expressionism rests primarily on the extent to which artists subsumed all their elements under the aegis of a generative idea, the discovery of the unknown within themselves, to give a different weight and focus to the general modernist vocabulary at hand.

Speaking metaphorically, early Abstract Expressionism represents a descent from the golden light of pure reason, from the abode of Apollo, to Dionysian realms—it is a Nietzschean acquiescence to the darkness of the unsurveyed terrain of the unconscious, which the painter hopes to penetrate to the lowest depths to enter Hades and drink from the river Lethe. When he wrote “A Tour of the Sublime,” Motherwell reflected on this descent: *When living Ulysses meets in Hades the shade of Ajax, from whom he had won the armor and set on the course that led to Ajax's death, Ulysses expressed his regret; but Ajax “did not answer, but went his way on into Erebus with the other wraiths of those dead and gone.” One has not the right from one's anguish to bring to the surface another's anguish. This must be the meaning of the first century A.D. treatise on the Sublime when it says: “The silence of Ajax in The Wraiths is inexpressibly great.”*

Perhaps—I say perhaps because I do not know how to reflect, except by opening my mind like a glass-bottomed boat so that I can watch what is swimming below—painting becomes Sublime when the artist transcends his personal anguish, when he projects in the midst of a shrieking world an expression of living and its end that is silent and ordered.³⁰

Earlier the traditional artist's muse had been internalized, but now more definitely located she was not only stationed in, but she was also equated with, the artist's own unconscious.

Communicating the feeling of the Sublime—so often stated as the intentions of these artists in their later Abstract Expressionist paintings and so often expressed as the viewer's reaction to the paintings—is actually achieved through peripheral viewing. The sense of being enveloped and surrounded by the painting (as opposed to the act of scrutinizing an object) is realized when the subliminal peripheral viewing that we do continuously is suddenly intensified.

In this essay I have attempted to outline important aspects of Abstract Expressionism during its formative years. The artists used a general vocabulary

of shapes derived from twentieth-century art. In their quest for a significant art of congruent with Freud's and Jung's discoveries in psychology, they bypassed what must have seemed the most innovative art, geometric abstraction, for an organic Cubist-Surrealist format that appeared more human and less technological. Gorky was a member of the Surrealist group, and both Rothko and Newman later referred to their early paintings as surrealist. But the art of these painters, as well as that of the other Abstract Expressionists, differs from Surrealism in practice and turns to a truer form of Surrealism more in line with the original tenets of Breton's manifesto of 1924. Innovations in early Abstract Expressionism are to be found in peripheral imagery coupled with a primitivistic subject matter reflective of myths used by psychologists. Also the painters' open-ended attitudes toward the process of painting in which self-definition occurred as an uncalculated result, not an intended outcome, is a crucial element of this art even in the formative years. The differences between its formative period and Abstract Expressionism as we commonly think of it in the late forties and fifties occur in the increased scale and abstraction of the later paintings. By the fifties the majority of these artists dropped mythic overtones in favor of abstract titles, probably because they intuited that the large size of their works, which were intended to be seen from a distance of only a few feet, would encourage peripheral vision and consequent preconscious or unconscious reactions. To look at a Pollock drip painting, a Rothko hovering field, a Newman zip, a Reinhardt black painting, or a Motherwell Elegy, for example, from a close vantage point is to be confronted with surfaces that deny focused scrutiny and compel the viewer to scan peripherally. In this manner Abstract Expressionists in later works distill their art of the subject matter that was so important in helping them to achieve formal innovations and allow their emphasis on a new way of seeing to stand alone. For them subject matter served as a lever to pry loose the modernist vocabulary at hand from its original associations. Their subject matter became a personal mythos at times associated in formal terms with cave paintings, Roman frescoes, and squiggling biomorphic shapes reflective of microscopic realms. Always their subject matter existed on the fringe, the fringes of civilization (its beginnings) and the fringes of the mind, which led them to peripheral imagery, the fringes of vision. Once they made their concerns concrete in designately visual terms, they relinquished the lever, subject matter, to emphasize their discovery. And this change differentiates early Abstract Expressionism from its more abstract descendant.

1 Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman, Letter to the Editor, *New York Times*, 13 June 1943, sec. 2, p. 9.

Lawrence Alloway reported that, according to Gottlieb, Rothko wrote this section ("Melpomene and Graffiti: Adolph Gottlieb's Early Work," *Art International* 12 [20 April 1968]: 21-24; reprinted in idem, *Topics in American Art Since 1945* [New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1975], p. 27).

2 Mark Rothko, Introduction to *Clyfford Still: First Exhibition of Paintings* (exhibition catalogue, Art of This Century, New York, 12 February-2 March 1946).

3 To my knowledge, *Black Hand*, 1943 (fig. 68), is the first handprint by a New York artist. Later handprints occur in Pollock's *Number 1*, 1946, Hofmann's *Third Hand*, 1947, and in many works by

Jasper Johns. In the late forties and the fifties the atavistic and also aesthetic qualities of handprints figure largely in the art of Tony Stubbins, an English member of the little known School of Altamira.

It is interesting to note that a handprint occurs on the cover to a catalogue for Miró's 1936 exhibition at Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York.

4 Lee Krasner, conversation with Robert Carleton Hobbs and Gail Levin, The Springs, East Hampton, New York, 31 August 1977. Krasner recalled that Pollock changed the title to the painting on a stormy day when both James Johnson Sweeney and Peggy Guggenheim came to visit. When I queried her as to the significance of the storm and whether it suggested the myth, i.e., the rumbling bull, Krasner

refused to say. She simply repeated, "It was a stormy day and if you want to make a connection that is up to you." She did say she would not discount the importance of the storm as Pollock frequently was affected by such circumstances.

5 Stamos, on a questionnaire from the Whitney Museum of American Art, [1955], Artist's File, Library of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Stamos wrote, "To free the mystery of the stone's inner life my object." I wish to express my thanks to Barbara Cavaliere for furnishing me with this statement.

Barnett Newman, Foreword to *Stamos* (exhibition catalogue, Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, 10 February-1 March 1947) Newman wrote:

The work of Theodoros Stamos, subtle and sensual as it is, reveals an attitude towards nature that is closer to true communion. . . . One might say that instead of going to the rock, he comes out of it. In this Stamos is on the same fundamental ground as the primitive artist who never portrayed the phenomenon as an object of romance and sentiment, but always as an expression of the original noumenistic mystery in which rock and man are equal.

6 Martica Sawin, "Transcending Shape: Richard Pousette-Dart," *Arts Magazine* 49 (November 1974): 58.

7 In light of Gorky's interest in a worm's eye view of the world, it is interesting to note a quotation by Amédée Ozenfant in *Foundations of Modern Art* (trans. by John Rodker [New York: Dover Publications, 1952; first published in English, 1931], p. 289):

We must lie flat and stretch out on the earth: everything changes when we take up the position of the newly born or dead. Seeing things from a height of five feet six inches when we are erect, shows them at our service: the world is at our feet. But stretched out, the blades of grass about us become forests, and God's creatures beneath our eyes equal to us: our blind egocentricity corrects itself, because we see where we stand in the ensemble of things." This attitude is also akin to Paul Klee's.

8 Lee Krasner, conversation with Hobbs, New York, April 1977.

9 John Graham's *System and Dialectics of Art*, annotations and introduction by Marcia Epstein Allentuck, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), p. 95, Question 4, "What is the purpose of art?"

10 John Graham, "Primitive Art and Picasso," *Magazine of Art* 30 (April 1937): 237-38.

11 Robert J. Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (1938; rev. ed., New York: Vintage Books, 1967), pp. 178-224. The term "primitivism of the subconscious" is Goldwater's.

12 Tony Smith, telephone conversation with Hobbs, October 1975.

13 The last two characteristics listed are especially representative of Rothko's style.

14 Robert Motherwell, conversation with Hobbs, Greenwich, Conn., 14 November 1975.

15 Richard Pousette-Dart, conversation with Hobbs, Suffern, N.Y., November 1975. Pousette-Dart does not remember this piece. He did frequent the Museum of Natural History in the thirties and created

in the early forties forms of amazing similarity to those appearing in Northwest Coast American Indian art.

16 Esther Gottlieb, conversation with Hobbs, New York, December 1975.

17 Ibid. Mrs. Gottlieb related that he saw these works at the Metropolitan Museum. Also, Gottlieb said to Martin Friedman, "The way I arrived at the pictograph stemmed from my great fondness for early Italian paintings of the 13th and 14th centuries" (quoted by Mary R. Davis in "The Pictographs of Adolph Gottlieb: A Synthesis of the Subjective and the Rational," *Arts Magazine* 52 [November 1977]: 147, n. 22).

18 Thomas B. Hess, *Barnett Newman* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1971), refers to Newman's interest in Indian Mounds. Also Newman wrote poetically about terror felt by primitives in "Las formas artísticas del Pacífico," *Ambos Mundos* 1 (June 1946): 51-55; reprinted in English in "Art of the South Seas," *Studio International* 179 (February 1970): 70-71; and in *The Ideographic Picture* (exhibition catalogue, Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, 20 January-8 February 1947).

19 Gorky's art of the thirties would not correlate with this observation since at that time he was a close follower of Picasso.

20 James Johnson Sweeney, *Joan Miro* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1941; reprinted, New York: Arno Press, 1969), p. 13.

21 Dore Ashton, *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), p. 98.

22 Jeffrey Wechsler, *Surrealism and American Art 1931-1947* (exhibition catalogue, Rutgers University Art Gallery, New Brunswick, N.J., 5 March-24 April 1977), p. 21.

23 Nicolas Calas, *Confound the Wise* (New York: Arrow Editions, 1942), p. 244.

24 Sidney Simon, "Concerning the Beginnings of the New York School: 1939-1943: An Interview with Robert Motherwell conducted by Sidney Simon in New York in January 1967," *Art International* 11 (Summer 1967): 20-23.

25 Clement Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting," contained in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961) pp. 212, 218.

26 Robert Motherwell, "Painters' Objects," *Partisan Review* 2 (Winter 1944): 93-97.

This idea receives further elaboration in Motherwell's unpublished lecture, "French Art vs. U.S. Art Today," Lecture to "Forum 49," Provincetown, Mass., 11 August 1949, typescript in the collection of the artist, Greenwich, Conn.

27 In "Melpomene and Graffiti" (*Topics*, p. 26), Alloway reported, "Gottlieb told me that when he happened to learn of preexisting meanings attached to any of his pictographs, they became unusable. The signs needed to be evocative, but unassigned."

28 Rothko's concern with dim lighting has been clearly noted. See Brian O'Doherty, "The Rothko Chapel," *Art in America* 61 (January 1973): 15: *His sense of the environment was theatrical rather than architectural, and his chosen*

lighting for his art was more dramatic than gallery lighting; he favored a shadowy indeterminacy that would allow his canvases to gather exactly the right amount of light to declare their presence and monitor its every change.

Also Thomas B. Hess ("Editorial: Mark Rothko, 1903-1970," *Art News* 69, no. 4 [April 1970]: 29) relates the following anecdote about Mark Rothko: *Philip Guston remembers the time when he and Rothko went to see the installation of one of Rothko's shows at Janis. They strolled into the gallery and Mark, without a word, switched off half the lights. When Janis emerged from his office, the three of them chatted a bit and, in a pause in the conversation, Janis slid off and turned all the lights back on. Rothko didn't say anything. They finished their visit; Janis went back to work, Guston and Rothko waited for the elevator, and just before they entered it, Rothko turned half the lights back off again. "I'm positive," Guston says, "that Mark sneaked up there every day and turned the lights down—without ever complaining or explaining."*

Stamos remembers at the Betty Parsons Gallery all the artists helped to hang their own shows and often aided fellow artists. He said that Newman, Reinhardt, Rothko, and he all insisted on dim lighting because they felt strong lighting would make their paintings look washed out. Once Rothko came to visit Stamos and mentioned enjoying a certain painting hanging in a dark area. He told Stamos to keep the painting in this spot because he liked the way it looked without illumination. Stamos said that the room at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century where the Americans exhibited contained windows so there was no way for exhibiting artists to control the lighting. He also mentioned that the Kootz Gallery was known for its overpowering lights. Janis was also usually brightly lit. Theodoros Stamos, telephone conversation with Barbara Cavaliere, 19 November 1977. I wish to thank Cavaliere for relaying to Stamos the question which I had about gallery lighting.

Betty Parsons, in a letter to Hobbs, 17 January 1978, mentions, "As I remember, the lighting for the large paintings of Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, etc., were moderately lit with flood light not spot light."

Motherwell has said that he prefers dim lighting in galleries whenever possible (Motherwell, conversation with Hobbs, Greenwich, Conn., 23 January 1976). But in the forties he did not make a practice of exhibiting his art in dim lighting.

29 Paula Franks and Marion White, eds., "An Interview with William Baziotis," *Perspective No. 2* (New York: Hunter College, [1956-57]), pp. 27, 29-30.

30 Robert Motherwell, "The Ides of Art—a tour of the sublime," *Tiger's Eye* 1 (December 1948): 48.