

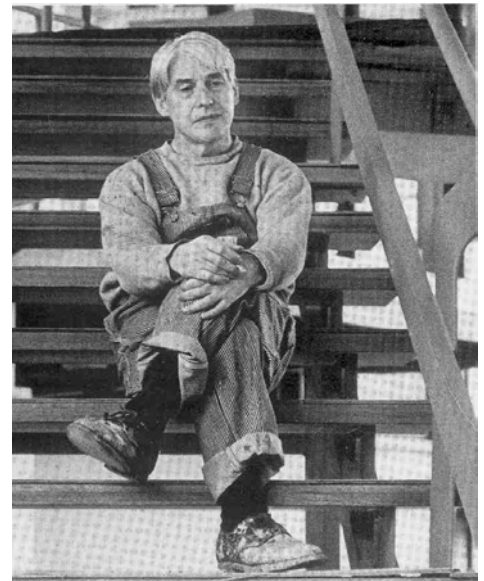
FOR DE KOONING, PAINTING HAS BEEN 'A WAY OF LIVING'

By Bennett Schiff, *Smithsonian*, April 1994

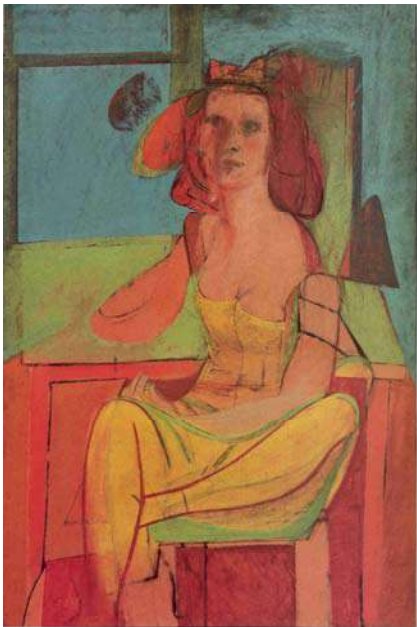
Arriving in America as a stowaway in the 1920s, the young Dutch artist threw himself into the pure, raw joy of brush on canvas

The initial encounter with America of Willem de Kooning—a stowaway fresh off a ship in a strange land—was an instant love affair. As he and the country celebrate his 90th birthday this month, the mutual admiration has lasted for six decades. During that long time, in which this country saw the birth of the first major, independent, plastic art form in its history, de Kooning, who was there at the beginning—who helped to make the beginning—emerged as the closest thing we have to a Living National Treasure.

The new art form was, and still is, most commonly known as Abstract Expressionism, but that label doesn't begin to describe all of it. It has also been called Action Painting, which takes in only a part of it, and the New York School, which is perhaps the best description because it embraces the wide variety of its styles, some of them distinctly opposite to one another.



Willem de Kooning—here, in his studio in the 1960s—turns 90 this month.



Seated Woman, 1940, bristles with pent-up energy amid its fine balance.

Because of its force, vitality and originality, the new painting can be likened to another indigenous American art form—jazz. If one could objectify visually, for example, a Ben Webster or Lester Young or Charlie Parker solo, one might, very reasonably, come up with a de Kooning canvas or, on an opposite visual scale to de Kooning, one by Mark Rothko, also a founding member of the New York School. The subject is pure emotion, held together with a fluid, skeletal structure of clean improvisation, a free-fall drop into the unconscious.

For the Abstract Expressionists, it was Freud and Jung and, later, the cataclysm of World War II that precipitated the new art. It had begun simmering in the late 1930s, got under way in the early 1940s and by the early '50s had a full head of steam. When the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art, in 1958, sent abroad the artworks of 17 painters of the New York School, they fell like a revelatory bombshell on artists in Europe. Soon after, the center of world art shifted away from Paris and came to rest in New York City. Some years later de Kooning stressed: "It's not so much that I'm an American. I'm a New Yorker."

A bit of Holland on Long Island

living . . .," he had said; and it helped, after the frenetic city years, to have a comfortable home and studio in a landscape that reminded him of his native Holland.

He was, in fact, about to change that. In 1963, he moved to eastern Long Island near East Hampton, an area that was drawing more and more artists to its sweeping spaces of lowland, sky and sea. "Any style of painting... is a way of living today, a style of

Here, in the little community of Springs, Willem de Kooning lives today. Looking like a glass-walled warehouse, the studio he designed and built was a perfect environment for making paintings; but now, stricken by Alzheimer's disease, he is no longer painting.

By the time de Kooning had his first one-man show, at the Charles Egan Gallery in 1948, he was very much part of the scene. He had appeared in a number of stellar group showings, including one in 1942, which included Bonnard, Braque, Stuart Davis, de Chirico, Andre Derain, Matisse, Picasso, Modigliani, Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock. This brilliant constellation of modernists had been chosen by John Graham, an aristocratic Russian expatriate artist and theoretician

whose perceptive eye had a decided effect on the art of the time. De Kooning's ascent, beginning in the late 1940s, was rapid; and since those pioneering days, whether his work has been admired or hated among artists, critics, curators, dealers and the public, he has been a continuing presence. I have felt that presence since the '50s when, as an art critic in New York, I got to know the artist and his work.

Abstract Expressionism itself, as a movement, is over. It lasted from roughly the late 1940s until about the early '60s, a shelf life of some dozen years or so. That isn't so short a lifetime for art movements of the modern age; Impressionism lasted about the same amount of time and Fauvism less. Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism flashed and cooled out, while Orphism went by in the blink of an eye.

And, in America, we have had in quick-time march: Op, Pop, Minimalism, Conceptualism and Magic Realism. For a while something called Patternism fluttered by; more recently, they are talking of Deconstructionism. Not to worry. Painting itself will continue as it has from the beginning on the walls of caves.

A grand master's movement of one

During all of this, decade after decade, de Kooning himself has remained a grand master of what has evolved into his own movement of one. Despite the revisionists who have already begun to load up for a kill, it seems destined to last as a strong force in our cultural history. "Personally," he wrote in 1951 in an essay on abstract art, "I do not need a movement. What was given to me, I take for granted." There was however, such a thing as a one-man movement, as in Marcel Duchamp, which was all right "because it implies that each artist can do what he thinks he ought to—a movement for each person and open for everybody."

Now, to pay tribute to the artist, who was born on April 24, 1904, two of the country's shining museums—the *Smithsonian's* Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and the National Gallery of Art—have mounted survey exhibitions of his work.

The Hirshhorn offering is made tip of 50 works from its own extensive collection. Among them are sculptures that Joseph Hirshhorn—whose collection formed the core of the museum that now bears his name—acquired directly from de Kooning during what became a fast and binding friendship. There is a fascinating record of that friendship in the form of a series of intimate letters.

The National Gallery exhibition is an intensely focused survey of the artist's major work from 1938 to 1986. Its 84 paintings were culled from museums and private collections in this country and Europe; three key works came from the Hirshhorn

The last works in the National Gallery shows dates from 1986; some time after that de Kooning's output slowed down, until he stopped painting altogether. His wife, the painter Elaine de Kooning, whom he had married in 1943 and from whom he had been separated for many years, had returned to look after him. "Bill was always home base," she said. When Elaine died in 1989, his daughter, Lisa, and his lawyer, John L. Eastman, applied to the New York State Supreme Court to have de Kooning declared incompetent to manage his affairs. They were eventually appointed conservators of the estate.

It is of considerable value. Estimates of the inventory of unsold paintings in 1989 were in the neighborhood of \$300 million. (In November of that same year a 1955 de Kooning painting, *Interchange*, smashed the record for the highest price ever paid for the work of a living artist when it sold at auction for \$20.8 million. It was not the only one that had gone into the multimillions.) In addition, his holdings in real estate, cash and securities were valued at more than \$7



Above: De Kooning takes apart traditional female nude in *Woman* (1948), disturbing with her staring eye and teeth.

Below: The gray light and fragmented signage of the city are captured in *Zurich*, an oil and enamel work from 1947.



million. De Kooning, who could never quite believe it, had become a millionaire many times over. Yet, aside from the relief of not having to worry about money—he had had his landlord-at-the-door times along with so many of his fellow artists—it didn't make that much difference in how he lived.

Once he had it, and could buy all he wanted of the paint and canvas of the best quality—the one and only area in which he cared to splurge—anything else having to do with money seemed to be of little interest to him. In 1982, at the premiere at the Kennedy Center of a documentary film about de Kooning, the film's narrator, Dustin Hoffman, mentioned an astronomical price brought at auction for a de Kooning painting. To the amazement of the audience, the artist's distinctive voice, marked by his flavorful Dutch accent, rose in the dark and still theater: 'Jesus Christ!' it shouted in disbelief.

"I didn't intend to be a painter—that came later"

In fact, by then there had been many such prices, but the mention of them was still a shock to the artist—a shock that is understood when one recalls that he was penniless when he arrived in 1926 at the age of 22. Yet, never has anyone fit into a time and a place more easily, taking what was offered and giving back in full measure. He had not, remarkably enough, come to America with the idea of being an artist. As he told the English critic and writer David Sylvester in a famous 1960 interview broadcast on the BBC, which was later widely reprinted, "I really intended to become an applied artist. I mean, it was more logical to be a designer or a commercial artist. I didn't intend to become a painter—that came later." America, as he saw it, was a place in which if one worked hard a person could get on well in the world, "while art, naturally, was in Europe." To his delight, he soon learned different.



"Even abstract shapes must have a likeness," de Kooning said of the biomorphic abstractions in paintings such as *Fire Island* (1946). Here the imagery is sexually charged, the lively shapes suggesting cavorting body parts.

De Kooning had a natural way of getting along with people, a kind of easiness, an unforced kind of common touch that is not at all that common. Not the least of these qualities was his openness and his ready wit and humor. He worked very hard, often obsessively; but he also knew how to have a good time.

Three days after checking into the Dutch Seaman's home in Hoboken, New Jersey, he found work as a housepainter at the grand salary of \$9 a day. He found work, too, as a commercial artist; but on discovering to his dismay that housepainting paid better, he went back to it. In time, he began painting more seriously, supporting himself by doing odd jobs. "So I styled myself an artist and it was very difficult," he said. "But it was a much better state of mind." It is important to note that de Kooning was a thoroughly trained professional artist when he arrived in this country. He had, for eight years as a night student, undergone the rigorous training in Rotterdam, his birthplace, at the Academy of Fine Arts and Techniques. At age 12, he had been apprenticed to a firm of applied arts decorators. By the time he emigrated, he was an impeccable draftsman; he had mastered lettering, carpentry, gilding, marbleizing and wood-graining; and he had studied art history and theory.

He counted himself lucky, he told the influential critic Harold Rosenberg in 1972, to have met in America "the three smartest guys on the scene: [Arshile] Gorky, Stuart Davis and John Graham. They knew I had my own eyes, but I wasn't always looking in the right direction. I was certainly in need of a helping hand at times. Now I feel like Manet who said, 'Yes, I am influenced by everybody. But every time I put my hands in my pockets, I find someone else's fingers there.'"

In the mid-1930s, at the height of the Depression, de Kooning spent a productive year and a half working for the Works Progress Administration, an experience that provided an adequate income while broadening his acquaintance with many other artists in the same boat. Artists in those days were a sort of economic underclass; they didn't have much money, and their expectations were modest. They hardly expected to actually sell work. It was enough to keep at it, hoping for

inclusion in a gallery show and notice in a newspaper or art magazine. But being an artist was a calling, busy and exciting and meaningful.

It could also be tragic. Arshile Gorky, the graceful, immensely talented emigrant from Armenia, Mark Rothko and Philip Guston—all pioneers of the new American painting—ended their remarkable careers as suicides, as if, in the end, they had aimed their paintbrushes directly into their own hearts. Careers such as these, art historian Jack Flam has pointed out, "can be seen as representative of many of the conflicts that affected the avant-garde American artists of the 1940s—perhaps the last generation that was able to consider being an artist a heroic undertaking without feeling self-conscious about it." As de Kooning has said, being an artist then was a way of living. Sometimes, even if the art worked out, the way of living did not.

"I'm not poor I'm broke"

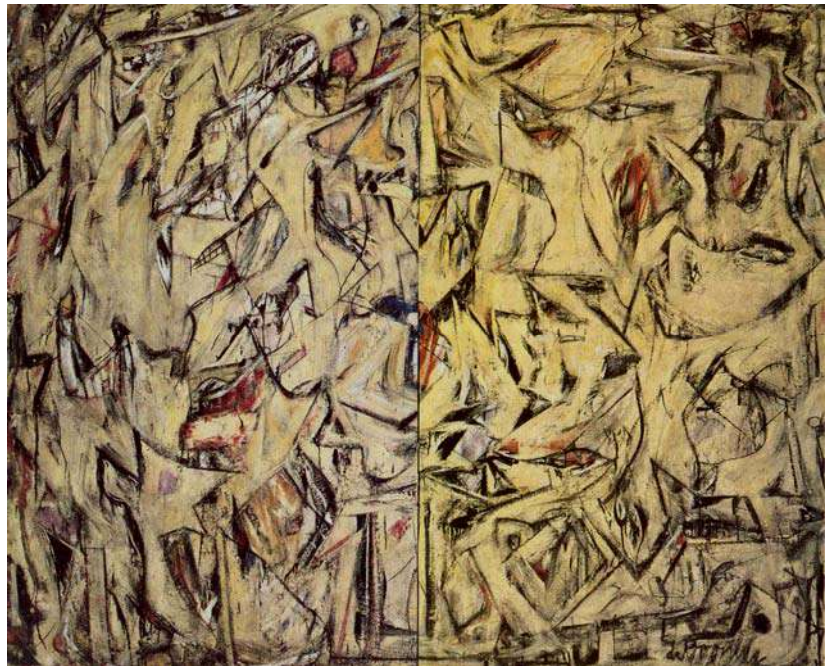
But most of the time it did, in the sense of a warm, communal feeling that existed among the artists. "In those days, nobody bought any art," the sculptor Ibram Lassaw recalled at a panel discussion held last fall at the Hirshhorn. "We were all broke. I remember de Kooning saying, 'I'm not poor. I'm broke.' No one had telephones. We just dropped in on one another." At the same event, artist and teacher Louis Finkelstein recalled how artists sought out each other's company. "There was a sense of community in which de Kooning was in the forefront," he said. There was a need, "in the most touching sense," to exchange ideas, and de Kooning was "distinctive in his openness and charity to other artists."

In the mid-'30s, cafeterias were the meeting place of choice; coffee was 5 cents a cup and you could talk and keep warm. As writer and poet Edwin Denby recalled, "Rudy Burckhardt [the photographer] and I kept meeting Bill at midnight ... and having a cup of coffee together. Friends of his often showed up, and when the cafeteria closed we would go to Bill's loft ... and talk some more and make coffee...."

A dozen or so years later, the scene had shifted; there had been a decided breakthrough. A number of the artists had gallery representation, and their work was increasingly known to museum curators. Critics such as Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, known collectively among the artists as the "Artbergs," were immensely influential; their essays came forth as if from the Mount itself, and were treated as if they had been carved in stone.

The communal scene had shifted from cafeteria to bar, chiefly the Cedar Street Tavern in Greenwich Village, which the regulars called the Cedar Bar. This was an ordinary watering hole, which is what the artists liked about it. No pictures hung on the walls, which were so neutral in color—a sort of institutional corridor green—that they attracted no attention at all. Nor were there any tourists. To be sure, in time the tourists would come, along with the art history students and doctoral candidates; but by then the artists had left. A high-rise apartment building now stands on the site. The Cedar, now a couple of blocks uptown, is not the same.

Many artists and other locals dropped in every night or so, always sure of meeting a friend or making one. I lived in the area and I often dropped in myself. The food was good cafe fodder and cheap and, at 2 A.M., helped to sober one up. Bill de Kooning usually stood at the bar, frequently with Franz Kline by his side. Kline told terrible jokes, which he and his buddy invariably found uproariously funny. Guston was often there, and many others now mentioned in the histories of the time. Jackson Pollock, by then living in the

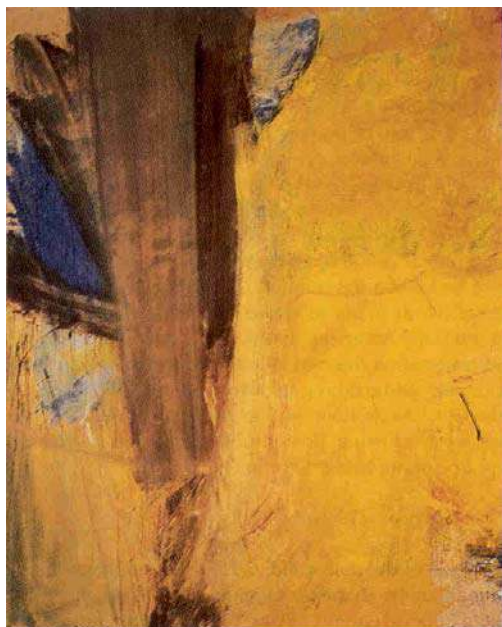


Title of densely packed, mural-size *Excavation* (1950) may allude to debris of Manhattan construction sites. Such pictorial immediacy "became the hallmark of Action Painting," writes Hirshhorn's Judith Zilczer.

Hamptons, might drop in while in New York. The tale is told that, one night, he tore the door off the men's room. Enough regular customers insisted that they saw it happen so that you are right to believe it or not.

Leo Castelli, the art dealer—these days the renowned art dealer—would be there rubbing shoulders, a charming and gentle man. And also on hand, with her blinding wit, was that percipient and wicked novelist Dawn Powell, so admired by Edmund Wilson and Gore Vidal, both of whom, years apart, wrote long appreciations of her still generally unknown work.

Powell published a novel, *The Golden Spur*, which was her name for the Cedar Bar. The man on whom the main character of her book was based, Peter Martin, was there, too. It was Pete Martin who had said to me one night, speaking of insomnia, "Every time I close my eyes the lights go on." A few years earlier, he had opened the famous City Lights Bookshop in San Francisco, in partnership with poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Powell's book gives a good idea of the time and place.



Above: In works of the late '50s, including *Montauk Highway*, brushstrokes are broader and freer; color is stronger.

Below: The turmoil of his earlier paintings is no longer seen in de Kooning's late works, such as *Untitled III* (1981).

Certain nights of the week the bar would be empty. The regulars would be uptown on 57th Street or along Madison Avenue for openings, for a look at what was being done, for drinks. There would be parties afterward and, at some time or another, the crowd would converge on the Cedar for the rest of what remained of the night.

Going to an opening of de Kooning's recent work in those days—the early '50s to the early '60s—and seeing the paintings for the first time was a visual adventure of stunning force. Color, shape and texture exploded off the walls, hit me directly in the eyeballs and bounced around inside my head for some time afterward.

The landscapes were freakish combinations of furies; de Kooning blew up the canvas, holding nothing back. And they were done in the most delicate of colors—pinks, greens, yellows, oranges and blues—in tones and hues I hadn't imagined before. Spread out before the viewer was an elemental force that was still lovely and sweeping and, yes, lyrical. No one else had done that.

In this kind of painting the artist is working for himself, sorting things out, looking around, searching. So why should what he does, seeking his won salvation perhaps, be of interest to us? Because, if he is good enough, he is excavating a deep wellspring of emotion, a common one. The result can reach others in the way that a certain slant of light or a soft lake at night can. It is the ability of such artists to reach a communicable area of human experience that makes their work worth looking at and, when the artist is someone of real stature—no one can say why some rare ones are and most are not—the work can be inspiring, maybe disturbing, joyous and lasting. Now, decades later, these paintings still blaze and breathe on the wall.



De Kooning, time and again, would be the first to point out that he was an eclectic painter, generous and open in his admiration for so many artists, living and long dead. He looked deeply at, and was influenced by, the work of El Greco, Soutine, Rubens, Mondrian, Miro, Giacometti. In his earlier work, one can see distinct references to Matisse and Picasso. And, also to Roman wall paintings. He frequently said that where he came from was no secret: it was Arshile Gorky. And, he also said, it was Jackson Pollock who broke the ice. And yet, when you see a work by de Kooning, you know it is from his hand. His brushstrokes are, in their way, fingerprints.

"That's Bill's, isn't it?" Franz Kline once said, pointing to a painting on the wall during an interview with the poet Frank O'Hara in 1958. "You can always tell a de Kooning," he added, "even though this one doesn't look like

earlier ones or later ones. It's not that style has a particular look, it just adds up."

Unlike the other artists of the New York School, de Kooning never deserted figurative painting. Although much of his work was entirely abstract, he had begun painting figures of men and women in the late 1930s. He continued to paint his famous and disturbing series of women for decades afterward, combining women with landscapes in the '80s.

The depth and quality of de Kooning's work is evident in the National Gallery exhibition; from his works of the early '40s—portraits of anonymous men and women done in daring pinks, oranges, hennas, blue-greens and salmon tones; to the comparatively little-known black-and-white and white-and-black enamel paintings of the '40s; to the sweeping, air-filled cityscapes of the '50s; and on to the landscapes of Long Island and the late paintings, which are pared down, space-filled exercise in incandescence punctuated by bejeweled colors.

These last paintings have been compared by some art historians and curators to the late works of Titan, Monet, Picasso and Matisse as examples of a kind of a revelatory awakening, a sort of summing up of a lifetime of experience; and some would agree with them. Despite faint traces of imagery and shape, however, they are nothing like any of his previous works. It would be wonderful to have Franz Kline, who died much too early at age 52 in 1962, comment on these.

Barbaric heraldic banners of furious beauty

Of all de Kooning's works, and for reasons that are obvious to anyone who sees them for the first time, it was his series of women that raised the most commotion. He began the first series in 1938 and kept returning to the subject for the next 50 years. In a way, the women look like barbaric heraldic banners, images that large armies on foot might fly to frighten off the enemy. And they have a kind of furious beauty as well; hardly pretty, they are, rather, aggressively sexy, electrified.

For all of his long painting life, Willem de Kooning has sought the elusive, to catch a glimpse of something worth noting, to paint the glimpse, the feeling that the glimpse sparked.

"I look out of the window, and it happens over there. Or I can sit in a chair, sit and think. That's the beginning—and I find myself staying with it, not so much with this particular glimpse, but with the emotion of it," he once said.

Perhaps, what he was looking for was not transformation so much as transfiguration. We don't know whether he's found it. We like to think he has. We see signs of it in his best work. He can't tell us.

By Bennett Schiff, who wrote most recently on Amedeo Modigliani, in the January issue. He profiled Surrealist Rene Magritte in September 1992.



A sailboat makes its way across the turbid center of the 1977 seascape *North Atlantic Light*. After the artist moved from New York City to Long Island, in 1963, his subjects also shifted from urban to pastoral ones.



De Kooning, *Woman I*, 1950-52