

# The Museum of Modern Art

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## FIRST BARNETT NEWMAN RETROSPECTIVE AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The first major retrospective exhibition of work by Barnett Newman (1905-1970), one of the most original and influential of the band of artists that emerged in the decade after World War II, will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from October 21 through January 10, 1972.

The large size of certain of his pioneering canvases, the purity and drama of his color, and above all the immediacy and simple splendor of his art especially recommended it to the younger abstract painters who were searching for their own styles in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This exhibition of more than 160 works traces his development from the lyrical "cosmic landscapes" of the early years through the monumental, color-saturated canvases of his breakthrough period, including Vir Heroicus Sublimis, (1950 - 1951) and Cathedra (1951).

Among the 77 paintings, dating from 1945 through 1970, are four important late canvases never before shown: Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue IV of 1969-70, and Midnight Blue, Be I (Second Version) and Untitled, all of 1970. All 14 paintings in The Stations of the Cross series are included, as well as Newman's six sculptures, together for the first time, and installed in the Museum Garden. His largest, the monumental Broken Obelisk, was given to the Museum on the occasion of the opening. Pastels, drawings, mixed media pictures and prints complete the retrospective. Many works not seen before are from the estate of the artist or from the collection of his wife Annalee Newman. Other lenders include museums in London, Amsterdam, Stockholm and Basel, as well as private collections from the East to the West Coast of America.

The exhibition, initiated more than a year before Newman's death in July 1970, was selected by the well-known critic Thomas B. Hess, and organized with the continuous help of Annalee Newman. As Guest Director, Mr. Hess was assisted by Virginia

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Allen, Associate Curator of the Museum's Department of Painting and Sculpture.

"It is clear that history accepts Newman along with such of his friends as Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Arshile Gorky, Mark Rothko and Davis Smith as revitalizers of painting and sculpture and as the founders of a revolutionary new approach to modern art," Hess says in the monograph\* being published in conjunction with the show. "In 22 years of work he produced some of the most influential and magnificent pictures of the century: grand, strong, profoundly moving."

Newman often pointed out that the artist must start out like God, with chaos, the void; the blank canvas, no forms, textures or details. His own first move was an act of division, straight down, creating an image. As Hess says, the image not only re-enacts God's primal gesture, it also presents the gesture itself, the "zip," as an independent shape: man, the only animal who walks upright, Adam, virile, erect.

Barnett Newman was born in New York January 29, 1905, and died there July 4, 1970. His parents had emigrated from Russian Poland. They did well in America and by 1911 his father owned a prosperous growing company that manufactured men's clothes. As a child, Newman was a sports fan, learned Hebrew as a living language (his father was an ardent Zionist), took music lessons, attended the opera and concerts. He cut classes at DeWitt Clinton High School to spend hours in the galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. While he was finishing his senior year at high school he attended classes at the Art Students League, and later, while at CCNY, he continued to study at the League. After his graduation in 1927, he was persuaded by his family and friends to go into his father's business for a few years, perhaps until 1929 or '30 when he would have made enough money to tide him over the beginning of his career as an artist and would enable him to study and travel. But the market crashed in '29, and for the

\* Barnett Newman by Thomas B. Hess. 160 pages. 172 illustrations (12 color plates, 160 black and white photographs). Bibliography. Hardbound \$12.50; paperback \$7.50. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Distributed by New York Graphic Society, Ltd.

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next 10 years he tried to salvage what could be saved from the business and pay off debts.

During this time he became interested in politics, ran for mayor and taught art in high schools. In 1936 he married a teacher, Annalee Greenhouse.

But he was dissatisfied with his painting, and during the '30s and early '40s he destroyed most of it. He felt that the revolutions of Cubism, Surrealism, the Bauhaus and Expressionism had been played out. Around 1939-40 he stopped painting, and it took him about five years to start again. During this period he wrote and continued to study botany, geology and ornithology -- seeking nature outside the studio environment.

His breakthrough came in 1948. He had begun with the assumption that there was nothing left for an artist to do but start at the beginning, all over again, as if Europe never existed. As Hess says, "The dark-red painting with an orange stripe painted down its middle, which was to provide a starting point for almost all Newman's later work, was titled Onement, a word which suggests wholeness, harmony, but also, as Newman himself pointed out, refers to At-onement, Atonement.

"By using symmetry, by placing the zip dead center in the painting, the constricting apparatus of composition was wiped away at a sweep... Newman discovered in Onement that whatever the perils of monotony might be, symmetry more than compensated for them by destroying the whole art-look, art-object convention.... By reducing composition to the equivalent of zero, Newman also raised color to its highest power."

Two years later Newman had his first one-man show at Betty Parsons' Gallery; his second was in the spring of 1951. The first was well attended; the second, largely ignored. Both were attacked by the press. Between 1951 and '53, Newman was at his most painterly, Hess notes, and describes some paintings of that period in the exhibition. "In a few years...he had become the master of an enormous range of means and of

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images; he could project a wide variety of emotions in every mode, from the small intimate statement of The Way I to the epic sweep of Cathedra, from the blazonlike, tight-lipped dignity of Day One to the voluptuous energy of Achilles."

During the '50s Newman's work was reviled by critics and undefended by friends; in 1957 he had a heart attack which forced an interruption in his work. Then, in the spring of '58, The Museum of Modern Art selected canvases for The New American Painting, a group show that toured Europe and was later shown in New York. At the same time he was given a one-man retrospective at Bennington. In March of 1959 the pictures from the Bennington show inaugurated the French & Co. gallery. About this time Newman's work began to sell, and by the '60s he was a famous, internationally acclaimed artist.

He completed The Stations of the Cross, begun in 1958, in 1966. Hess maintains that in the Stations, Newman is telling us that He is yet to come.

This, I believe, is the ultimate daring in Newman's Stations. He raises them to a philosophic enquiry on the nature of agony, on the nature of his art and on the life of man-as-an-artist. Fused with the pictorial structure of the black paint and the raw canvas and the serial nature of the image is the symbolic structure of his subject matter, which contains -- secretly, although Newman always leaves hints and clues -- his own ontological insight, with its parallels to (or metaphors from) the spiritual visions of the great Kabbalists.

Newman's most ambitious work in the early '60s is Shining Forth (To George), 1961, dedicated to his brother who died in February of that year. Hess says the title describes perfectly what the light is doing in the painting; it seems to pour from behind the quivering negative "zip" and intensify even more brightly at the edges of the severe black cuts.

Newman's six sculptures were executed between 1950 and 1969. In describing the first, Here I, Hess says:

The motive, then, was to lift the verticals out of the painting, to solidify them, place them on the earth, relate them only to themselves and to the spectator. They assume independent presence, larger than man, but in a size comprehensible by men. We see them, but they are above us.

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His next sculpture, Here II, constructed in 1965, relates to Shining Forth -- three vertical elements, the center one wider and heavier than the others. Here III, from 1966, relates to the high vertical ascent of a 1965 painting, Now I.

In 1967 Newman executed Broken Obelisk, his largest work and one of the most impressive monumental sculptures of the 20th century. Like all his last four sculptures, it was made in an edition of three. One is now in Houston, the second in Seattle and the third in The Museum of Modern Art Sculpture Garden, the gift of an anonymous donor.

The main drama of Broken Obelisk lies in the point of contact between the two masses, in the spark-gap of energy where pyramid meets and sends aloft the shaft of the obelisk, [Hess says]. It is an impossible conception, daringly carried out, with all its tensions gathered in toward a climactic central junction.

The pyramid and the obelisk are two of the oldest monumental forms known to man; Newman uses their antiquity to add drama to a new form, that of their meeting.... It celebrates the faith of the artist in his art, in his ability to break through dead styles, to find his own forms and subject, his own past and present.

Zim Zum I is connected in shape and title to Newman's 1963 synagogue project, shown in photographic panels. Made in 1969, the sculpture consists of two sections, each composed of six Cor-ten steel plates and each eight feet high, set at right angles to each other in a zigzag line. The spectator walks through this corridor of compressions.

Newman stayed with black and white in his paintings from 1958, when he started work on the Stations, until 1962 when he did pictures in which he used yellow on raw canvas. Shortly after finishing White Fire with its raw canvas (which to Newman suggested yellow), hot-orange field and black zip (which against the cadmium red lightly glints with complimentary ultramarine) he began a new series, open-ended and without any given format. He titled it Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue. "He had returned, after some 11 years, to a full, passionate use of color on a large scale," Hess comments. The series of black-and-white and color lithographs executed in '63 and '64 titled Cantos, which are shown, were also important in his renewed use of

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color.

The first painting in the series, Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue I, was begun in 1966. Later Newman wrote:

It was only after I had built up the main body of red that the problem of color became crucial, when the only colors that would work were yellow and blue. It was at this moment that I realized that I was now confronting the dogma that color must be reduced to the primaries, red, yellow and blue. Just as I had confronted other dogmatic positions of the purists, neo-plasticists and other formalists, I was now in confrontation with their dogma, which had reduced red, yellow and blue into an idea-didact, or at best had made them picturesque. Why give in to these purists and formalists who have put a mortgage on red, yellow and blue, transforming those colors into an idea that destroys them as colors? I had, therefore, the double incentive of using these colors to express what I wanted to do -- of making these colors expressive rather than didactic and of freeing them from the mortgage. Why should anybody be afraid of red, yellow and blue?

Who's Afraid...II, 1967, was a tough answer to the dulcet lyricism of Number I, Hess says.

Plans for the exhibition were initiated in 1969 before Newman's death and several important works were completed for it. A different version, directed by Mr. Hess, will be shown next year at The Tate Gallery in London, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and the Grand Palais in Paris under the auspices of Dr. E. de Wilde, Director of the Stedelijk.

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