

The Museum of Modern Art

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AD REINHARDT

June 1 - September 2, 1991

The first retrospective by a major museum in this country devoted to the work of American artist Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967) opens at The Museum of Modern Art on June 1, 1991. Comprising approximately ninety-five paintings, gouaches, and collages, **AD REINHARDT** examines the development of the artist's work from the 1930s through the 1960s, revealing his lifelong exploration of the possibilities inherent in pure abstraction. On view through September 2, the exhibition has been coorganized by William Rubin, director emeritus, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, and Richard Koshalek, director, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

The exhibition is supported by grants from The Henry Luce Foundation, Inc., and Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert H. Kinney. Additional support was provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.

Reinhardt was a member of the New York School, but by the early 1950s his art was developing in a direction different from the autobiographical concerns and gestural styles associated with Abstract Expressionism. During the 1950s and early 1960s, the austerity and seeming detachment of his work made it appear tangential to mainstream art, and it tended to receive less attention than that of other leading painters of his generation. Seeking to distill painting to a primary, holistic, and uniquely visual experience, Reinhardt's intensely pared-down style provided a critical bridge between the artists of his generation and a number of emerging Minimalists and Conceptual artists of the 1960s.

The exhibition opens with Reinhardt's early work, including collages made of colored papers and newspaper and magazine cut-outs from 1939 and 1940. In the 1940s, Reinhardt's exploration of all-over abstraction leads to canvases with calligraphic forms or closely knit units in vivid colors.

In the early 1950s, Reinhardt's imagery becomes increasingly geometric. He imposes a symmetrical structure on the paintings, dividing the canvas into large vertical and horizontal units. In 1952 he limits his palette to subtle hues of blue or red.

The "black" pictures, in which the palette is reduced to shades of black, appear in 1954 and occupy the artist for the rest of his career. By 1960 Reinhardt adopts his final format of a five-foot square canvas, divided into a nine-square grid. At first sight, these works seem to be unified color fields, but more concentrated viewing slowly reveals cruciform structurings delineated by barely perceptible shifts in hue or tonality.

These works, which bear no evidence of brushwork or texture and are at once rational and mysterious, test the limits of aesthetic perception. Of these later works, Mr. Rubin writes in the preface to the exhibition catalogue, "Characteristics of his early and middle periods, such as lyricism and luminosity, were not rejected but distilled--and distilled again. We feel that the faint light which emanates from the resplendent 'black' pictures that end his career is the vestige of the refiner's fire."

Born in 1913 in Buffalo, New York, Ad Reinhardt grew up in Brooklyn and Queens. In 1935 he graduated from Columbia University, where he had studied with, among others, philosopher John Dewey, art historian Meyer Shapiro, and anthropologist Franz Boas. He continued at Columbia the following year as a graduate student in art history. He also studied painting at the American

Artists' School and at the National Academy of Design. In 1937 Reinhardt became a member of the Artists' Union and the American Abstract Artists, a group which at the time included the leading abstract painters in the United States and would enjoy the support of such well-known European exiles as Piet Mondrian and Josef Albers. The same year, Reinhardt joined the Easel Division of the WPA project, with which he remained involved until 1941. His painting was interrupted during World War II by service in the navy.

Throughout his career, the artist created cartoon satires that lampooned what was currently fashionable in art world discourse, art historical meditations, and polemical statements on art. Nevertheless, he saw his writing (and cartoons) as an extra-art activity, utterly separate from his painting. During his lifetime, Reinhardt's work was included in numerous group and one-artist exhibitions. Most notable among the latter was the 1966 retrospective at the Jewish Museum, New York. An exhibition organized in 1972 by the Städtische Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf, traveled to Eindhoven (The Netherlands), Zurich, Paris, and Vienna.

After its New York showing, the exhibition travels to The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (October 13, 1991 - January 5, 1992).

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