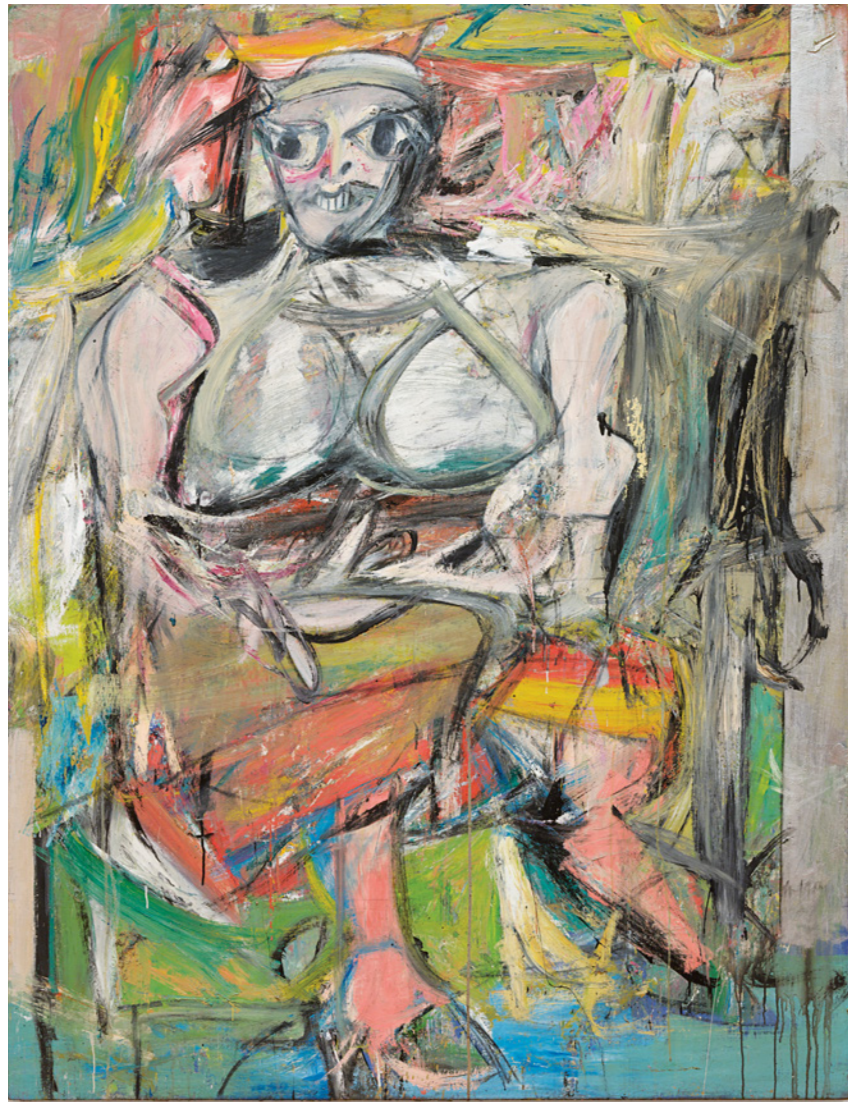
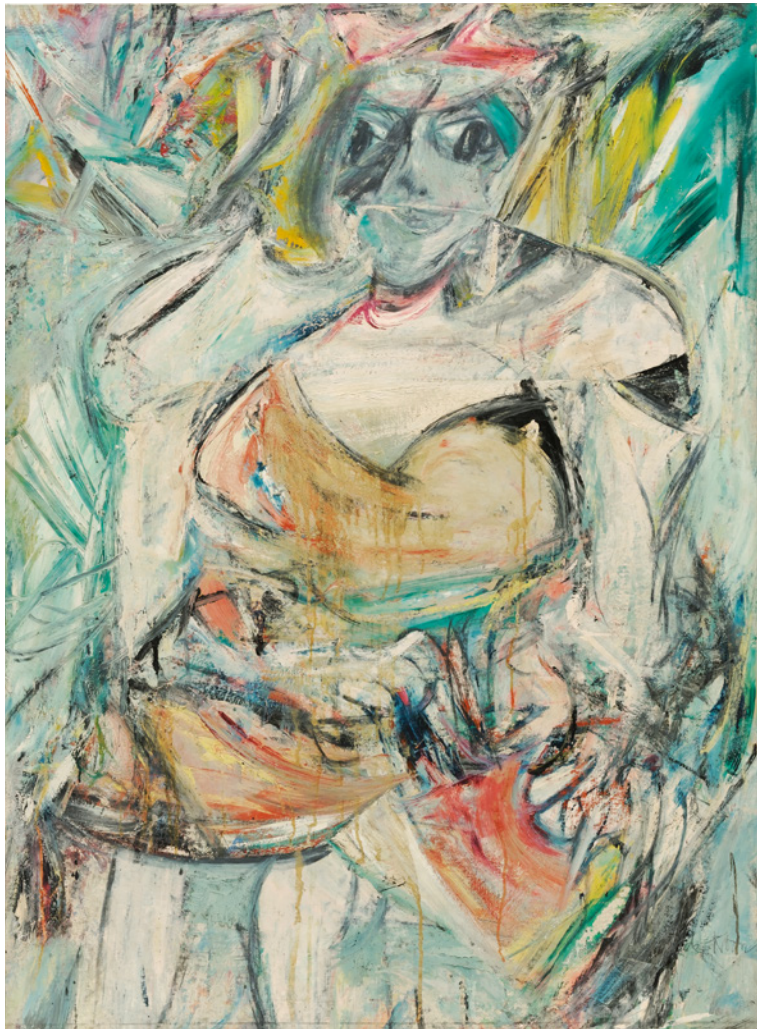
Woman, I (1950–52)
Woman, II (1952)
Seated Woman (1952)

These three apparitional beauties were participants in the sensational debut of de Kooning's Woman series of the early 1950s. Along with four other paintings and numerous drawings, their presentation at New York's Sidney Janis Gallery in the spring of 1953 provoked a considerable stir in the excitable art world of the time. Summing up the situation, *Time* magazine reported that de Kooning, long "a special pride of the most vociferous advance-guard abstractionists," had spent the last two years "painting women that anyone can recognize . . . as ripe as Tiepolo's baroque matrons, but they are fully clothed and mighty ugly, with ox eyes, balloon bosoms, pointy teeth and vaguely voracious little smiles. He pictures them in no particular setting, but somehow they convey the impression of being terribly tough, big-city, mid-20th-century dames. Some pained partisans of abstract art pointed out that de Kooning was attempting to ride two horses (representation and abstraction) at once, and thought he failed."

In fact, de Kooning had been performing a double equestrian act for some time—at least since his black-and-white series of the late 1940s. But where abstraction's true believers could tolerate, even savor, the veiled imagery in those paintings, what was to be made of these monstrous women? Over time they have come to be regarded as emblematic of de Kooning's art and, for all their figurative insistence, masterpieces of Abstract



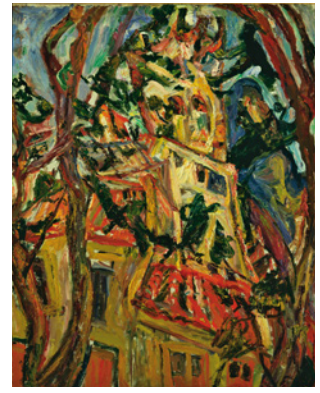
Woman, I 1950–52
Oil on canvas, 6' 3 7/8" x 58" (192.7 x 147.3 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Purchase, 1953



Woman, II 1952
Oil on canvas, 59 x 43" (149 x 109.3 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Gift of Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller, 1955

Seated Woman 1952
Pencil, pastel, and oil on two sheets of paper,
12 1/8 x 9 1/2" (30.8 x 24.2 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
The Lauder Foundation Fund, 1975

Expressionism, the first American movement to challenge the hegemony of European art. Though time and more expansive aesthetic attitudes have made the ladies of de Kooning's singular sorority somewhat less shocking, they refuse any retroactive calming down. Like Pablo Picasso's famous *demoiselles* forever in their brothel on Barcelona's Avignon Street (Carrer d'Avinyó), they retain their original elemental force. Although a prime influence, Picasso's 1907 masterpiece (fig. 1) was hardly alone in contributing to the appearance of de Kooning's early 1950s women. Acutely aware of the heritage of Western art, he said, "I began with women, because it's like a tradition, like the Venus, like Olympia, like Manet made *Olympia*. . . . There seems to be no time element, no period, in painting for me." Or more pungently, "Yes, I am influenced by everybody. But every time I put my hands in my pockets, I find someone else's fingers there." According to the *Time* review, de Kooning might have discovered Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's fingers in his pockets; more likely they were those of his countryman Peter Paul Rubens, whose robust sensuality and full-breasted, broad-waisted women greatly appealed to the twentieth-century artist, who insisted that "flesh was the reason why oil painting was invented." And he was ready to bend every effort to make the viscous stuff accomplish his contrarian will "to paint like Ingres and Soutine" at the same time. A look at *Woman, I* in comparison with Ingres's *Madame Moitessier* (fig. 5) and Soutine's *Red Roofs, Céret* (fig. 6) suggests how de Kooning went about realizing his goal. Like his monumentally self-assured, predatory matron, the aristocratic Mme M. looks out at the viewer with a devouring expression of



sexual superiority. And Ingres's conception of her as a "terrible Junoesque beauty" is certainly matched by the Amazon allure of *Woman, I*. But the Ingres-esque hardly goes uncontaminated. The suggestion made by David Sylvester that Soutine's landscape, shown at The Museum of Modern Art in 1950, was crucial to de Kooning's handling of paint in the Woman series was confirmed by de Kooning himself. Beyond such direct testimony, it might also be noted how closely the hands of *Woman, II* resemble those in Soutine's *Woman in Red* (fig. 7).

De Kooning spent more concentrated effort on *Woman, I* than on any other canvas of his career. Between 1950 and the summer of 1952 he painted it, effaced it, and repainted it some fifty times. Well into the second year of this repetitive activity he pulled it off the stretcher and discarded it, only to resurrect it at the urging of venerable art historian Meyer Schapiro.

5 Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres
(French, 1780–1867)
Madame Moitessier 1851
Oil on canvas, 57 7/8 x 39 3/8" (147 x 100 cm)
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Samuel H. Kress Foundation

6 Chaim Soutine (French, 1893–1943)
Red Roofs, Céret 1921–22
Oil on canvas, 32 x 25 1/2" (81.3 x 64.8 cm)
The Henry and Rose Pearlman Foundation;
on long-term loan to Princeton University
Art Museum, Princeton, N.J.

7 Chaim Soutine (French, 1893–1943)
Woman in Red 1923–24
Oil on canvas, 36 1/8 x 25 1/2" (91.8 x 64.8 cm)
Private collection

8 Elaine and Willem de Kooning in the porch-studio of Leo Castelli's house with a work in progress (no longer extant), East Hampton, New York, 1953. Photograph by Hans Namuth. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson

Finally, wrote Thomas B. Hess, who chronicled virtually every one of *Woman, I*'s various states, she "escaped by truck from [her] creator" for the Sidney Janis Gallery exhibition. By contrast, *Woman, II* and the drawing *Seated Woman* were produced in the porch-studio of the art dealer Leo Castelli's East Hampton house (fig. 8) in the summer of 1952. But because *Woman, I*'s final state is not the result of incremental change but of endless obliteration and reconstruction, its hectic velocity is no less breathtaking than that of the drawing or the image of her succeeding sister. De Kooning said that he worked so quickly in order to create the feel of something fleetingly glimpsed or a flashing moment of recognition: "That is the beginning, and I find myself staying with it, not so much with the particular flash . . . but with the emotion of it. . . . I'm almost illustrating the emotion."

Illustration, in the sense of depiction, had come easily to de Kooning, and he had honed his talent to Old Master level in works such as his early 1940s portrait of his future wife, Elaine Fried (fig. 9). By mid-decade, however, classicism had dissolved

9 *Portrait of Elaine de Kooning* 1940–41
Pencil on paper, 12 1/4 x 11 7/8" (31.1 x 30.2 cm)
The Allan Stone Collection

in figures of women devoid of foreshortening and minimally inclined to perspectival clues, with, as Sally Yard put it, their bodies "shaded . . . by what look like surges of nervousness and animosity acted out in blurs of line and swipes of paint" (fig. 10). Advance a few years to *Woman, I*, and a conflagration of blurs, swipes, smears, and other heathen examples of painterly bravura engulfs the painting. The plastic integrity that had held de Kooning's earlier figures inert and solid against a vacant, inactive space has been collapsed. Offering no impediment to the picture's free flow of energies, this bulky creature, like her sisters, sits in a space in which figure and ground form a single texture about as distinct from each other as real-life entanglements of body and mind, desire and will. If the pinks, yellows, and hot oranges of the first Woman unite to suggest a pictorial conflagration, the second's turquoise-blue face amid a surging mass

10 *Queen of Hearts* 1943–46
Oil and charcoal on fiberboard, 46 1/8 x 27 5/8" (117 x 70 cm)
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
Gift of the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1966

of more blues and turquoises punctuated by delicately scraped foamlike areas incites—with respectful apologies to Freud—a powerful "oceanic feeling."

Given its small size, the pastel drawing *Seated Woman* necessarily packs less emotional impact than its related canvases. Nonetheless, it displays its own charms and is useful for an understanding of de Kooning's procedures. Where her larger sisters are immediately formidable, *Seated Woman* seems a wary, worldly personage. Below lavish, oddly predatory lashes, her right eye swivels leftward, a movement emphasized by the directional slant of the nostrils and mouth and further encouraged by the schematic but bold black lines that endow this woman with a somewhat wolflike profile within the forward-facing oval of her head. While the device of the doubled head is Picasso's invention, it is here so cannibalized that it has become de Kooning's own. The disconnect between the woman's body and her head is the result of a benign decapitation. When seen "in the flesh," the line running across the pastel at just a little less than shoulder height and demarcating the top of the figure's breasts is quite obviously a cut that allowed de Kooning to join a body from one drawing to the detached head of another. This sort of mismatched image paralleled de Kooning's practice during the course of painting *Woman, I*, when he would often collage drawings onto the canvas to try out the effects of changes he was considering. In its final state, *Woman, I* exhibits a montage-like structure that is surely informed by the pasting and cutting processes that went into its making, as well as the stimulus provided by the independent drawings, such as *Seated Woman*,

that de Kooning was constantly turning out. Made at approximately the same time, *Seated Woman* and *Woman, II* may be linked rather more closely—the similarities of structure in their faces and the faux-collage line stretched above the lips in the painting strongly imply an interchange.

However inspired, the countenance and general bearing of *Woman, II* make her the most ingratiating of the six large women presented at de Kooning's 1953 exhibition, while the first is the most aggressively hostile. Rooted in history and myth, heralds of Andy Warhol and other Pop artists, the de Kooning *demoiselles* have provoked spirited commentary throughout the nearly six decades of their existence. Some have seen them as personifications of elemental force. Defending them collectively from a charge of "distortion," Leo Steinberg countered, "From what norm? She is no more distorted than a lightning bolt is a distorted arrow, or a rainstorm a distorted shower bath. She is a first emergence, unsteeped from a tangle of desire and fear, with some millennia of civilizing evolution still ahead of her. . . . De Kooning has descried a familiar shape, a form that even Adam would have recognized as from an ancient knowledge." James Fitzsimmons had a similar but more disturbed reaction, saying that these "ugliest and most horridly revealing" of paintings depict the "female personification of all that is unacceptable, perverse and infantile in ourselves . . . all that is still undeveloped." Forcing the highly cultivated Fitzsimmons to an uneasy recognition of the primitive within himself, de Kooning's modern-day Venus of Willendorf was the agent of her maker, the impresario of a dark and violently funny comedy on the nature of the human species. More often than not, observers described de Kooning's Woman in secular terms—a "big-city dame" who could be "a carnal product of wish fulfillment, a darling of the bar stool and barbershop magazines," or "a fat mama in bombazine," and so forth. Such comments would hardly have surprised the artist, who often found himself, he said, "wrapped in the melodrama of vulgarity."

In 1954, when *Woman, I* was shown at the Venice Biennale, the exhibition's American organizer, Andrew Carnduff Ritchie, gave a speech in which he criticized the critics who found de Kooning's representatives of "the so-called weaker sex . . . an appalling libel upon the good name of woman . . . who as mother, sweetheart, wife, has provided many advertisers with their most sentimental symbol." His closing line was, "However one may feel about them, . . . de Kooning's Eves, Clytemnestras, Whores of Babylon, call them what you will, have a universality, an apocalyptic presence that is rare in the art of any time or any country." On being asked why he had undertaken them, de Kooning affected an offhand cool: "I think it had to do with the idea of the idol, the oracle, and above all the hilariousness of it."