

Philip Guston in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art

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Philip Guston

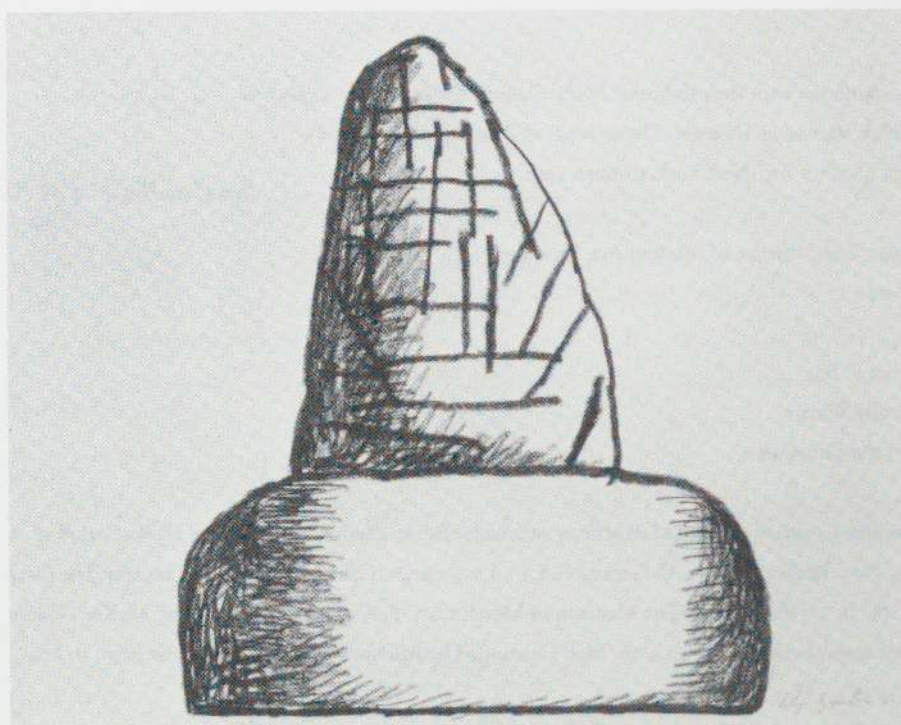
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Philip Guston

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The Museum of Modern Art, New York

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**This publication is made possible by a generous grant from
Mrs. Victor W. Ganz in honor of her friendship with Agnes Gund.**

Published in conjunction with the exhibition *Philip Guston: Works from the Collection*

Organized by Kirk Varnedoe, Director, Department of Painting and Sculpture

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, summer 1992

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Front cover: *City Limits*. 1969. Oil on canvas, 6' 5" x 8' 7/4" (195.6 x 262.2 cm). Gift of Musa Guston

Back cover: Untitled. (1980). Synthetic polymer paint and ink on board, 20 x 30" (50.8 x 76.2 cm).

Gift of Musa Guston

Title page: *Wrapped*. 1969. Pastel, 17 1/4 x 21 1/2" (43.7 x 54.4 cm). Purchase

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FOREWORD

The great quality and depth of the collection of The Museum of Modern Art are due to several forces. Chief among them are discerning acquisitions by curators and generous gifts from donors. Among the latter, a specially treasured strength of the collection has always been the works given by artists themselves, or by their heirs. We are deeply grateful to the widow of Philip Guston, the late Musa Guston, for continuing that valued tradition, and to their daughter Musa Mayer for her gracious cooperation. Adding to previous donations of important works on paper, Mrs. Guston further honored this Museum with the extraordinary gift of four paintings from the estate of the artist and with the bequest of three additional works following her death in April 1992. These donations, in addition to the paintings, drawings, and prints by Guston previously acquired, now give the Museum the most important Guston collection in any public institution in the world.

The mission of The Museum of Modern Art is not only to preserve and display such major works, but also to make them accessible to a broad public, as well as to art scholars through research and documentation, educational programs, and publishing. We are therefore particularly pleased to be able to mark the recent expansion of our Guston holdings with this publication, accompanying a special installation of works by Guston in our collection in the summer of 1992 and providing a permanent record of our comprehensive representation of his work in several mediums. The publication has been made possible by a most generous grant from Mrs. Victor W. Ganz in honor of Agnes Gund, President of The Museum of Modern Art. We express our very warm thanks to Mrs. Ganz for this gracious and thoughtful support.

RICHARD E. OLDENBURG
Director
The Museum of Modern Art

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Public collections often seek a balance between broad historical coverage and concentration in depth on the work of particular artists. The former entails the occasionally tepid comforts of historical correctness, but it is the latter that gives a collection its character and curators some of their most rewarding moments. The Museum of Modern Art is especially fortunate to have acquired the work of Philip Guston in profound depth both because of the quality of the work itself and because the unique blend of consistencies and contradictions in Guston's career illuminates some of the central challenges and crises in American art during his time.

The recent donations of seven works as well as an earlier gift of ten on paper by the widow of Philip Guston reflect her faith in The Museum of Modern Art, and also honor the models of scholarly attention to Guston's work set by Magdalena Dabrowski, Curator in the Department of Drawings, and Robert Storr, Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture. Ms. Dabrowski's 1988 exhibition and catalogue *The Drawings of Philip Guston*, published by the Museum, reaffirmed its engagement with his oeuvre; Mr. Storr has written extensively on Guston, most notably in his book *Philip Guston*, published in 1986 by Abbeville Press. I warmly thank these curators for their important roles in bringing this rich representation of Guston's work to the Museum, and in making it intellectually accessible to the public.

I also wish to acknowledge the generous assistance given the Museum by David McKee, of the McKee Gallery, New York, and his assistant Bruce Hackney in all matters related to Guston's oeuvre. Thanks are also owed those individuals without whose cooperation and hard work the present exhibition and publication would not have been possible: Riva Castleman, Deputy Director for Curatorial Affairs and Director of the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books; Michael Hentges, Director of Graphics, and Emily Waters, Senior Designer; Harriet S. Bee, Managing Editor, and Jessica Alholz, Assistant Editor, Department of Publications; and Victoria Garvin, Assistant to the Director, Department of Painting and Sculpture.

Finally and most importantly, I join Richard Oldenburg in expressing profound gratitude to the late Musa Guston for her exceptional gifts and to her daughter Musa Mayer for her kind support; and I redouble his gratitude to Mrs. Victor W. Ganz, who has so generously supported this publication honoring Agnes Gund.

KIRK VARNEDOE
Director
Department of Painting and Sculpture



Red Painting. 1950. Oil on canvas, 34¹/₈ x 62¹/₄" (86.4 x 158.1 cm). Bequest of the artist

GUSTON'S TRACE

By Robert Storr

PHILIP GUSTON PAINTED FOR THE LONG HAUL. Of his contemporaries Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, and Franz Kline, none was better prepared to extend the classical studio tradition in which they had been trained than Guston. Yet along with the others, he rejected that tradition at mid-century for the sake of an exploratory abstraction. Alone out of this cohort, however, Guston resumed making narrative pictures during the final decade of his life. The most lyric painter of first-generation Abstract Expressionists, he subsequently became the most daring exponent of the return to gestural figuration that began to flourish after the 1960s heyday of purely nonobjective formalism. The slow, nuance-bedeveled composer of the 1950s became the prolific storyteller of the 1970s, a master of atmospheres and weights, of impacted shapes and heavy tides of paint, of burlesque pathos and unsparing self-inquisition.

In a sense, Guston saved the best for last. Or, rather, with the spiderlike concentration of someone ensnared by his own experience, he wove and reweave his painterly web, feverishly rearranging the images that crowded his adhesive imagination, unknotting this symbol or that "thing" to get a closer look, only then to rebind them for future inspection or transformation. Guston died in Woodstock, New York, in 1980, before he could complete this task, leaving loose ends that have been seized upon by numerous

younger artists on whom his influence is evident and usually acknowledged. Meanwhile, in the dozen years since his death, public awareness of Guston has grown immeasurably.

The body of Guston's paintings, drawings, and prints now in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art constitutes the largest and most representative selection of his art available to the public anywhere. These holdings have recently been augmented by the generosity of his late wife Musa, who, in addition to earlier donations, in 1991 gave four major pictures, and in 1992 bequeathed three additional works to the Museum. These works—*North*, 1961–62, *Box and Shadow*, 1969, *City Limits*, 1978, and *East Coker T.S.E.*, 1979, plus two untitled works, of 1969 and 1971, and another titled *Head*, of 1977—seen here together with works previously acquired, chart the artist's course from 1950 through 1980: his turning away from image-making, his evolution as an abstract painter, and then his startling reinvention of autobiographical and allegorical figuration. As already indicated, every phase of the artist's work was thoroughly prepared, but more than any other period, it is the last decade that demonstrates the richness of his painting culture.

Guston was born in Montreal, Canada, in 1913, to Jewish emigrés from Odessa, in the Ukraine, who left around the turn of the century. In 1919 his family



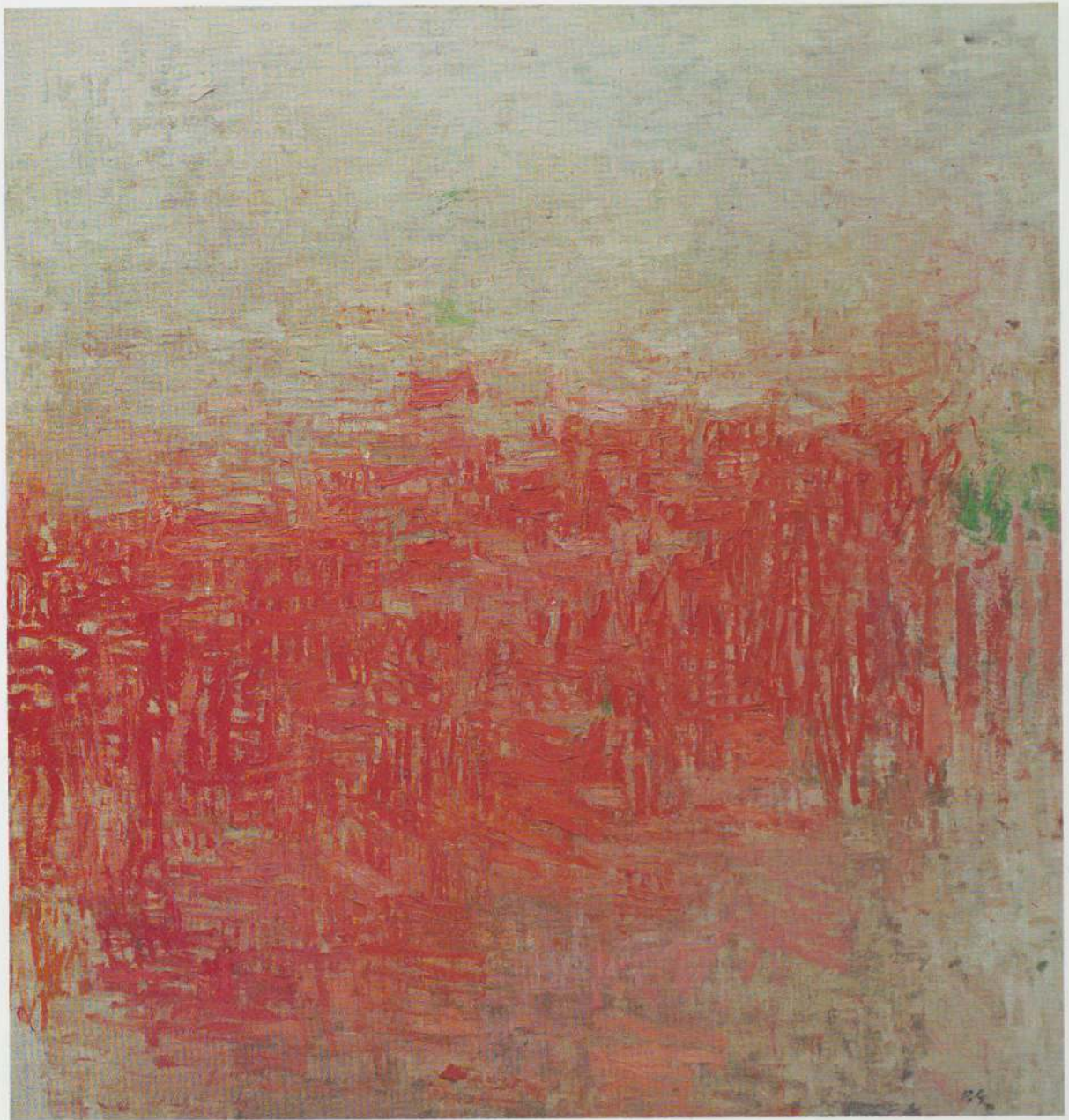
Untitled. (1955). Brush and ink, 17³/₄ x 22⁷/₈" (58.1 x 45.1 cm). Gift of Herbert Ferber

moved to California where, unable to cope with the stress of American life, his father killed himself a year later. Raised with seven older siblings by his mother, who encouraged her youngest son's artistic bent, Guston rapidly became assimilated to his surroundings in Los Angeles. A movie fan and avid imitator of the comics during his childhood, he had an early and propitious introduction to experimental art. Expelled from Manual Arts High School in 1928, along with his classmate Jackson Pollock, for producing satirical broadsides, Guston pursued his aesthetic education under the guidance of two mentors—a teacher and an established painter—who lent him avant-garde magazines, such as *The Dial*, and arranged visits to the Hollywood house of Walter and Louise Arensberg, whose pioneering collection of modern art included over two hundred important works by some fifty painters and sculptors. At the Arensberg's Guston first saw Cubist paintings by Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Juan Gris, Fernand Léger, and

Marcel Duchamp. There also he discovered the arid, proto-Surrealist fantasies of Giorgio de Chirico, who was to be a major influence on his work throughout his life but especially during the 1970s. Around the same time he witnessed José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros paint murals in Los Angeles. Torn between the two tendencies, represented by Italian "Metaphysical" painting on the one hand and the heroic art of the Mexicans on the other, Guston's own work alternated between exquisitely rendered commedia dell'arte scenes, and dramatic depictions of the Ku Klux Klan's persecution of blacks.

During the Depression years the call to make public art won out. In 1934 Guston went to Mexico under Siqueiros's patronage to paint a spatially complex fresco that featured Klansmen as anonymous symbols of oppression. Beckoned by letters from Pollock who had headed east when his friend had gone to Mexico, Guston moved to New York the following year. Once there, he promptly established himself as one of the most acclaimed muralists of the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which during the Depression sponsored a wide range of public art programs and sustained countless artists—including Pollock, de Kooning, and Arshile Gorky—who would otherwise have been unable to pursue their work. Despite his success, Guston soon began to have doubts about the formal conservatism of his Renaissance-inspired manner. These doubts were underscored by regular contact with the work of Max Beckmann, Léger, Picasso, and other modernists in New York galleries and museums. Redoubling this unease were his studio acquaintance with Stuart Davis, whose painterly pragmatism contrasted sharply with Guston's fastidious technique, and his sometimes acrimonious debates with Pollock, then still grappling with the dynamic formulas of Thomas Hart Benton and the symbolic violence of Orozco.

Anxious to experiment with new approaches away from the pressures of New York, Guston accepted a teaching job at the University of Iowa



Painting. 1954. Oil on canvas, 63¹/₄ x 60¹/₈" (160.6 x 152.7 cm). Philip Johnson Fund

in Iowa City (1941–45) and, afterwards, another at Washington University in St. Louis (1945–47). Brooding, subtle, and few in number, the pictures completed during this internal exile mixed de Chirico-like symbols and cityscapes, with bits of mid-western Americana, and Beckmannesque Expressionism. Guston's isolation did not, however, prevent his work from receiving recognition unprecedented in the experience of his peers. A First Prize for Painting at the Carnegie Institute's annual show of American art in 1945, a feature article in *Life* magazine in 1946, and a fellowship to the American Academy in Rome in 1948 assured him a prominent place in the art establishment of the period. Abandoning figuration, as he was about to do in spite of these honors, thus involved more than disengaging from his past; he was wagering an otherwise secure future as well.

Red Painting, 1950 (page 6), was the last in a series of obsessively reworked canvases in which Guston made the transition to abstraction, and it was the first of them to have the all-over structure that was henceforth characteristic of his art and of Abstract Expressionism generally. The two major paintings that preceded it—*The Tormentors*, 1947–48 (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art), and *Review*, 1949–50 (Estate of Philip Guston)—contained vestiges of forms found in his earlier work: irregular plaques and bars of color, hoodlike cones, rings, shoe-heel crescents, and stitching or nail-head strokes. Although they are flattened tonal compositions of modulated blacks and reds, both still allude to volumetric space. With its bottom edge functioning as a ground plane, *The Tormentors* is like a shelf crammed with spectral shapes as if one had X-rayed a Giorgio Morandi still life. *Review*, meanwhile, is divided between a dark "sky" above and what looks like a Roman wall studied with archeological fragments.

Although murky purple, green, brown, and orange wedges encrust it, and lines of various colors and lengths slide across it, *Red Painting* is, by con-

trast, essentially monochromatic. The canvas's dominant ruddy cast owes much to repeated scraping and scoring of the surface, which at times resembles a brittle version of the rich palette-knife surfaces of Clyfford Still. This technique is atypical of Guston though he regularly used a knife to skin preliminary layers off a work to make room for fresh paint, sometimes letting the tool's smear show at the margins or between brushstrokes. One result of having relied so much on a knife in this instance was the muddying of other pure hues to the point where one can barely distinguish them from their background but for the differences in value or the subdued chromatic buzz they set off in the surrounding red. The other consequence is that the work absorbs more light than it radiates or reflects, and in that way it differs sharply from Still's lightning-bolt fractured and illuminated expanses of raw color. Without horizon or depth, Guston's surface flickers with short brush marks, scratches, and erasures that never resolve themselves into self-contained forms; nor do they quite dissolve into a uniform field. Compared to the other two paintings, it has the feel of a tapestry that has been worn until the embroidered detail that highlighted the fabric was rubbed away, leaving visible the frayed, patchy under-weave. In fact, Guston had painted over a picture whose subtle reversals of figure and ground were much like those in *Review* prior to his last-minute revisions. The change greatly surprised curator Andrew Carnduff Ritchie who had chosen *Red Painting* in its earlier state for inclusion in his 1951 Museum of Modern Art survey, *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America*. Nonetheless, the result was of decisive importance to Guston's development. The decision to drastically alter the work was evidence of his uncompromising pursuit of a new painterly syntax, and also focused attention on the question much debated by Abstract Expressionists as to when, if ever, a painting was "finished." After *Red Painting* Guston was finished with abstracted pictures and set to make abstract paintings.

Painting, 1954 (page 9), which confirmed



The Clock. 1956-57. Oil on canvas, 6' 4" x 64 1/8" (193.1 x 163 cm). Gift of Mrs. Bliss Parkinson



Head—Double View. 1958. Brush and ink, 20 x 24^{7/8}" (50.7 x 63.2 cm). Purchase

Guston's new direction, remains one of his signal achievements. Gone from this canvas are the physical modesty and second thoughts of *Red Painting*. Much larger than that transitional work, *Painting* is imbued with a delicacy of another source and order. Above all it is the product of a greater immediacy of execution. Rather than block out and revise his shapes as before, Guston approached his new canvases without premeditation. He mapped the picture plane in short marks and intervals, working close to the surface and stepping back to examine the general composition only after long stretches. This meditative notational style derives in part from landscape studies the artist made while traveling in Europe during his time at the American Academy in Rome, and in part from the shifting bars and axes used by Piet Mondrian in his "plus-minus" works of 1913–17.

Guston's drawings of the period done with india ink and reed pen—a preferred medium of two other Dutch masters, Rembrandt van Rijn and Vincent van Gogh—or a bristle brush, such as *Untitled*, 1955

(page 8), display Guston's loose crisscross armature in its bare, shifting essentials, accented in this particular example by halftone washes and a circumflex stroke. Sometimes hovering in the middle ground, sometimes cascading from the top of a sheet to the bottom, the mesh of this and similar works crackled with the unpredictably flaring, skipping, splaying, and petering out of the simple repertoire of basic marks that composed it. Translated into modulated red and roseate pastes in *Painting*, this graphic structure shimmers on the caked grays and pale green and yellow tints that form the canvas' ground. Misconstruing Guston's method and intent, some critics of the period labeled him an Abstract Impressionist. He was nothing of the kind. Approximating nature was the furthest thing from the artist's mind, whatever superficial resemblance there might be between the luminous atmospheres in his paintings and those in works by Claude Monet, Alfred Sisley, or Camille Pissarro. In fact, Guston's aim was much closer to that of Mondrian in that he, too, sought to establish

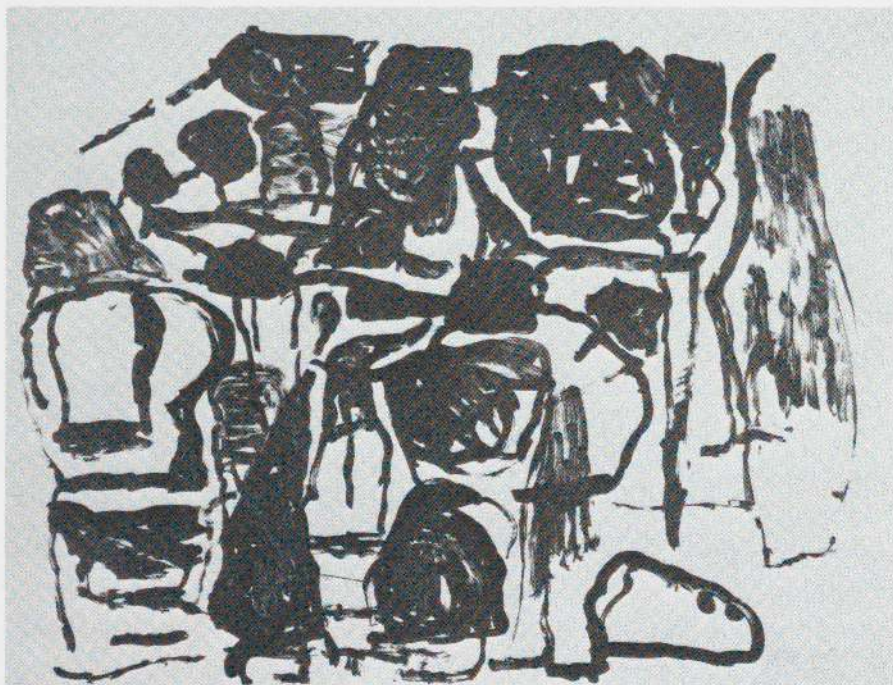
a dynamic equilibrium within a field of simple but unequal and asymmetrically deployed elements. Without Mondrian's utopian belief that art's essential terms could ever be known or their logic codified, Guston eschewed formal research for its own sake just as he shunned the idea of aesthetic progress. Instead, he hoped to find the means of recording unique experiences of an intuitive order that are the restorative exception to the anxious disorder of the normal human condition. Each work, an epiphany in paint, thus consisted of the material residue of concentration over time, and each preserved a fragile and uncertain grace.

While in Rome in 1949 Guston had become friendly with the avant-garde composer John Cage, and soon afterward in New York established with Cage the kind of creative bond with an artist outside his own discipline that he would later have with a number of writers during the 1960s and 1970s. Along with Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns, Guston was thus one of four major painters—and the eldest and most experienced among them—who in that period responded directly to Cage's riddling advocacy of the aesthetics of chance. Predisposed to anguished misgivings about the meaning of what he made, Guston found in Cage's lucid defense of "non-meaning" and his faith in accidental enlightenment both a spiritual release and a practical course of action. Thus his canvases of the early 1950s are the least emotionally demonstrative or physically aggressive of Abstract Expressionist paintings; based on the Cageian model, they instead mirror the act of disinterested and virtually disembodied perception.

Guston's fascination with serene "nothingness" eventually succumbed to a nagging preoccupation with the disturbed and disturbing "somethingness" ingrained in his abstractions. By the middle of the decade his palette changed dramatically, and his gesture broadened in response to that awareness, as can be seen in *The Clock*, a work of 1956–57 (page 11). Enriched by a greater range of saturated hues and

accidental admixtures, as well as by sharper and more extreme tonal contrasts, his paintings of this period were suffused by a kind of chromatic chiaroscuro. Doubtless under the influence of Beckmann, who had intensified his already high-keyed color by surrounding it with heavy black lines, Guston increasingly interspersed his reds, oranges, blues, ochers, browns, pinks, and greens with flurries and plugs of black pigment. As a consequence of this and the thickening of his strokes, the once seemingly distant patches of paint that spread through the tonal void of his paintings burst forward toward the viewer, all but occluding that emptiness. Whereas in earlier nonobjective paintings the exact compositional center shifted with the movement of the eye across a disintegrating grid, by the late 1950s the center's holding power was overwhelmed by the profusion of gnarled, rootless forms.

The centrifugal force active in these works is matched by an equally strong centripetal pull. Falling inward, the separate, sometimes swollen, sometimes wrinkled clots of paint that occupy the middle ground of *The Clock* coalesce into an irregular amalgam that flutters at its periphery and churns at its core. The interior and exterior stresses at work seem about to give substance to a new but as yet undiscernible entity. Roughly contemporaneous drawings like *Head—Double View*, 1958, for example, announce the return of representation without its meandering contour lines or tight hatches ever actually configuring a recognizable face. Neither is *The Clock* a picture of its namesake, although, like *Painting*, the time its creation took is marked upon it. In this instance, however, time's imprint appears on lumps of what seems to be organic matter that sends a shiver into the space around it. Vibrating between implosion and explosion, the increments of paint that build this central mass tick off the moments before their accumulation decisively takes or loses shape. These are the suspended moments in which artist and viewer contemplate a palpable but forever indeterminate imaginative possibility.



**Untitled. (June 20–26) 1963. Lithograph, 24^{5/8} x 31^{3/8}" (62.5 x 79.7 cm).
Gift of Kleiner, Bell & Co.**

By 1957 figuration was again latent in every gesture Guston made. Moreover, one often perceives a narrative interaction among a given painting's elements, as if its clustered forms were a crowd of actors waiting to be assigned parts. Such a reading is borne out by the artist's enthusiasm for filmmaker Federico Fellini, in whom he found a poetic theatricality akin to that of de Chirico. Guston could not help but animate abstraction. If, as art historian Henri Focillon maintained, form has spirit, then sooner or later that spirit is bound to express its will and not necessarily in ways the artist wishes or can harness to his conscious intentions. Such was Guston's predicament. Having spent most of the 1950s enjoying the hard-won freedom to paint without describing, during most of the next decade Guston grappled with the tendency of pure form to acquire the impure attributes of images.

Whenever Guston doubted his aesthetic course, he turned to drawing. Graphic means and formats afforded him the freedom to work exactly as fast or

as slowly as he thought, unhampered by the pauses drying paint required and by the other physical demands of large-scale canvases. Worrying a shape into existence, questioning or obliterating its identity with additional marks and then rephrasing it on another sheet in a few naked lines, Guston simultaneously elaborated and stripped-down his basic vocabulary.

Beginning in the 1960s, printmaking added a third option that combined the spontaneity of drawing with painting's unpredictable delayed effects. Lithography, with its almost unrestricted capacity to reproduce nuances of touch, was Guston's natural choice of medium, and he turned to it twice in this period, working with Tamarind Lithography Workshop in 1963 and Hollander Workshop in 1966. A few of these prints were executed in lithographic crayon—for example, *Untitled*, 1963. The rest were done with tusche, a dark black lithography ink that the artist sometimes used full strength and sometimes diluted. Loosely bunched together the



North. 1961-62. Oil on canvas, 69" x 6' 5" (175.3 x 195.6 cm). Gift of Musa Guston



**Open Washes. 1966. Lithograph, 20^{15/16} x 28^{9/16}" (51.6 x 72.6 cm).
Gift of Associated American Artists**

blotted lozenges, amoebic washes, and raveling contours that fill these lithographs have a decidedly pictographic quality. With hindsight one can already make out in embryonic form the shoes, cups, profiles, fists, and bottles that emerged fully in works made after 1968. It is also possible to see in these prints a clear precursor to the calligraphic manner developed by Brice Marden since he began in 1985 to reintegrate freehand drawing into the unified rectangle of his Minimalist panel paintings.

Even in this abstract mode, for Guston drawing was the equivalent of writing. His ties to writers were strong during the 1960s and became stronger and more numerous as the distance widened between him and many of his old New York School colleagues—a gap that grew in proportion to his reservations about abstraction. Collaborative projects were frequently the offshoots of his literary friendships. Over the years he lettered and embellished covers, single lyrics, and in some cases entire books by Clark Coolidge, Ann Waldman, William Corbett, and Bill Berkson; he also penned a series of caricatures of Richard Nixon and his administration

inspired by conversations with his neighbor Philip Roth, who was working on a satiric novel on the Watergate gang. Among the most beautiful of all these verbal/visual dialogues are the graphic interpretations he made of poems written by his wife Musa. One year after the accidental death of poet, critic, and Museum of Modern Art curator Frank O'Hara in 1966, the Museum published a commemorative collection of his poems, decorated by his artist friends, titled *In Memory of My Feelings*. Guston contributed to this volume six ink-on-plastic drawings, which he selected from a total of fifteen, to frame the typeset text of O'Hara's *Ode to Michael Goldberg*, one of the longer poems. Their quick and easy line nicely complements the poet's fluent colloquial voice, but belies the personal and artistic crisis toward which Guston knew he was headed.

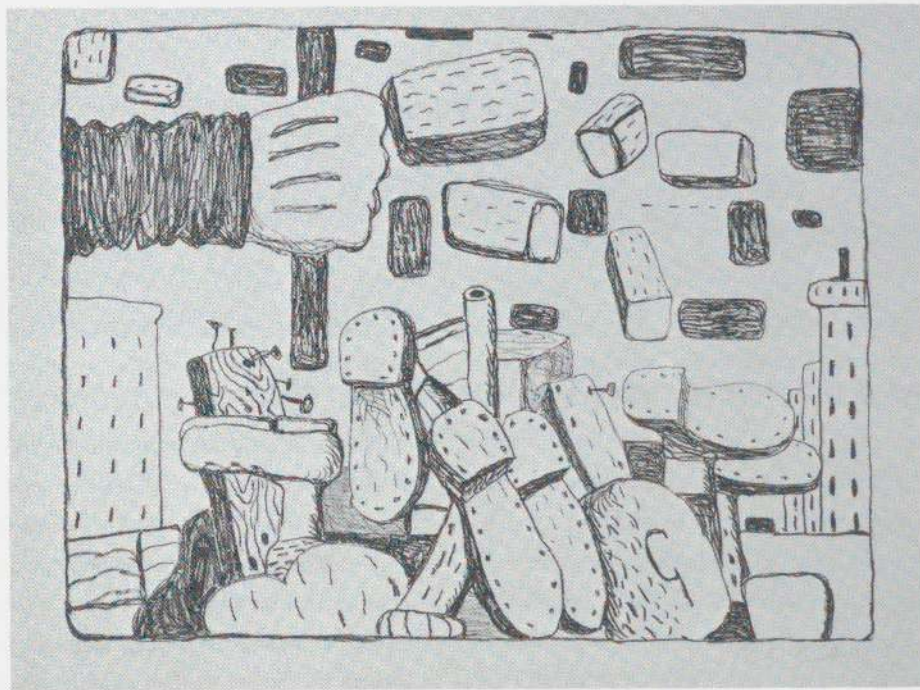
From 1960 to 1967, when Guston stopped working on canvas altogether for about two years, his paintings became structurally simpler, increasingly tonal, and thus that much more like his drawings. Made during one of the most difficult creative periods of his life, they are the least well known

and most underrated paintings Guston made. *North*, 1961–62 (page 15), is an exemplar of these works and of the process of reduction and consolidation that motivated them.

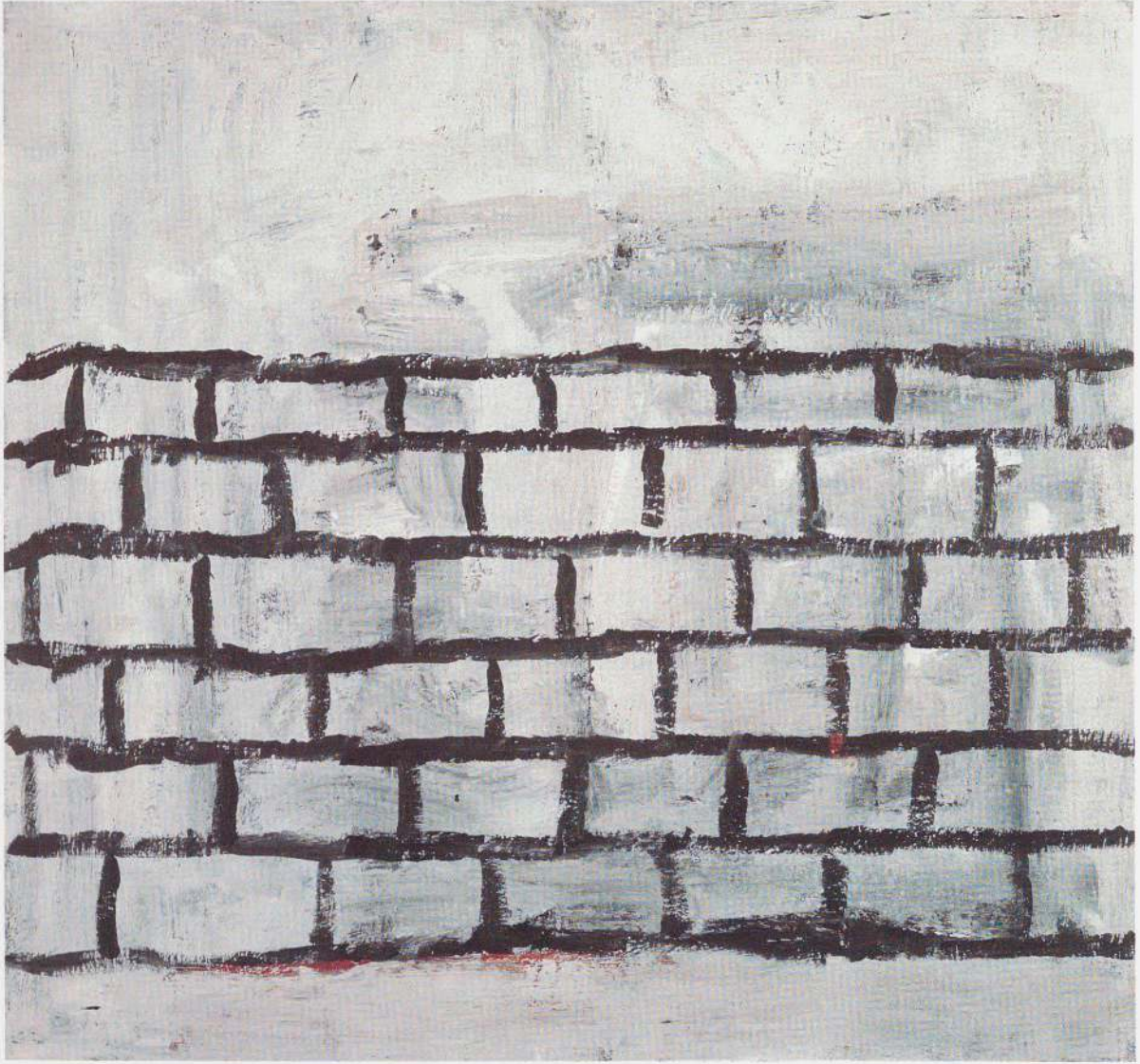
Leaving the framing edges of the painting loose and untouched except for the primer coat, and burying the colorful underpainting beneath successive layers of wet-into-wet painted grays, Guston concentrated his energies on positioning and redrafting the three snarled elements that occupy the middle ground. Highlighted by touches of orange-gold, these gestural knots have as yet no clear identity, and their frontal but unstable placement within that slathered gray field looks back to a similar, albeit more hesitant, treatment of forms in *Review*. The tension between gathering matter and diffusing light in *North* meanwhile suggests parallels with Alberto Giacometti's grisaille paintings, as does Guston's paint handling. Like Giacometti's efforts to capture the solidity of his model despite the impossibility of

ever accurately fixing his perceptions, each of Guston's stabs at delineating a shape or area was doomed to subtract as much as it added to the result, as if painting were a hopeless battle to check erosion conducted along a muddy embankment where shoring up one formation was bound to undermine the next. After *North*, however, Guston's shapes became increasingly massive and their backgrounds increasingly dense. Modeling headlike lumps of heavy viscous pigment, Guston seemed intent on conjuring human beings out of common clay. According to mystical cabalistic legend, such imitation of divine creation by mortal man could only produce monsters. In Guston's case it did.

The incubation of these monsters took place between 1968 and 1970, which were also among the worst years of civil strife in this country's recent history. Anguished over what was going on outside his studio in the society at large, Guston kept his artistic false starts and radical change of heart to himself.



The Street from the portfolio *Ten Lithographs by Ten Artists*. 1970 (published 1971).
Lithograph, 19^{15/16} x 26^{3/8}" (50.7 x 67 cm). Gift of Dr. Samuel Mandel



Untitled. 1969. Synthetic polymer paint on panel, 30 x 32" (76.2 x 81.2 cm). Bequest of Musa Guston

Making their appearance in a 1970 one-person show, his new cast of characters forced itself on an unwarned public like a band of marauders. Unwelcome to those who had expected from Guston a refined Abstract Expressionism, these interlopers shamelessly went about their business all the same.

The sphinxlike persona in the pastel drawing *Wrapped*, 1969 (see title page), serves as an appropriately threatening and inscrutable scout for this raucous raiding party. Compact, bluntly described, and emblematic, this bust nonetheless recalls the fraying *Head—Double View* of 1958 in its featureless but heavily scored countenance. More antic versions of this masked brute soon followed. In *City Limits*, 1969 (see front cover), a three-man crew of slapstick thugs cruises a vacant metropolis in an old jalopy. It is unclear who they are, but plainly they are up to no good. Their iconographic antecedents can, of course, be found in Guston's anti-Klan murals of the 1930s. As bad as things were in 1969, however, the Klan was not the widespread domestic menace it has since become. Rather than invoking an actual and specific evil, the hooded men Guston called "those little bastards" were symbolic embodiments of a general know-nothing violence, as were the clenched fists that appeared out of nowhere in prints such as *The Street*, 1970 (page 17), along with the flying bricks that fill the air and the half-buried legs that litter the foreground. Even so, a simple desire to make protest pictures hardly squares with the cartoon manner Guston seems to have adopted suddenly. The change was, in fact, gradual and deeply rooted. It had taken the artist two years of working on small, single-image panels to identify his protagonists, their attributes, and their settings; and nearly all of these works hark back to images found in his paintings of the 1930s and 1940s. The type of caricature in which he rephrased them, meanwhile, dated to the artist's childhood imitations of comic strips such as *Krazy Kat* and *Barney Google* as well as to satirical portraits of fellow artists done during the 1950s and 1960s.

Nevertheless, the basic armature of Guston's

abstract paintings remained intact behind the objects and activities depicted in this revived graphic style. Applied solely and directly to the once insubstantial structures, that broad treatment lent his objects an ambiguous and uncanny bulk. The blunt horizontals and verticals of *Untitled*, 1969, laid over a thick bed of grays, describe what initially seems to be a wholly nonobjective grid but is in fact a brick wall, which is inexplicably transparent despite its ostensibly heavy construction.

Untitled (Rome, 1971), painted two years later during a visit to Italy (page 21), returns to the image—with a difference. This time the wall is a solid red, and suspended above it in close formation is a hail of flying bricks whose gravity-defying chunkiness makes the wall below seem as flimsy as a stage flat. However, their unusual spacing and position recall Guston's paintings of 1952–54, whose delicate horizontal and vertical strokes seem to be mimicked by the bricks in their elephantine proportions.

Using this vernacular manual of style, what Guston wanted to do, he said in 1970, was to tell stories. The principle story told in paintings such as *City Limits* is that of an America run afoul of its liberal promise. It is a tale of blundering meanness and self-betrayal. Identifying himself with Klansmen, as he does in several pictures showing a sheet-covered artist at his easel, Guston insisted on depicting the fascination cruelty holds even for the civilized. At a time of crisis, when many decried the actions of nefarious "outside agitators" or consoled themselves with thoughts of their own good intentions, Guston was reminding his fellow citizens that we remain our own worst enemies. Setting scenes and cuing his ill-starred cast in a more broadly brushed version of his abstract gestural manner, Guston, like a film director, reinvented what Harold Rosenberg had once called Action Painting as a paradoxically comic and horrible "Action!" painting that was anticlinal cartoon-like rather than anxiously refined, yet for all that possessed of a strange baroque grandeur.

While recondite images filled the artist's mind and social discord prompted his angry response, domestic reality also inspired some of Guston's best, most mysterious, and most troubling pictures of the 1970s. For many of these his wife Musa was quite literally his muse. It is her parted hair that appears on the horizon in many canvases, like drawn theater curtains bracketing a brow whose thoughts one cannot read. It is her raised eyes that are visible above the flood in other pictures; and at least once her tears are its source. Simultaneously mythic and painfully intimate, these paintings are scenes from a difficult but enduring marriage.

Head, 1977 (page 22), is the starkest among them. Made shortly after Musa suffered a series of small strokes, it is a painting of a wound. Only the simple contours of a shaven head frame the drawn-back flaps and interlaced sutures of this surgical window on the brain. Yet the contrast between the ugliness of the stitched aperture and the delicacy of the profile makes an indelible impression of the fragility of the life at stake and the crudeness of medical necessity. Other paintings describe Guston's marital ambivalence and guilt, the result of his single-minded concentration on his art. Inspired by near loss, *Head*, in contrast, is a modern ex-voto and testament to his abiding love.

Almost a decade after *City Limits* Guston painted *Box and Shadow*, 1978 (page 24), the symmetrical stillness of which seems the antithesis of the clamorously eventful Klan pictures. Divided into essentially monochromatic bars and bands, its background is expansive and nearly abstract, as if the artist had rendered Mark Rothko's or Barnett Newman's "sublime" in warm red mud. The lush oleaginous brushwork of Guston's late paintings is most evident here, especially in the monochrome areas where the artist was able to cut loose, confident that the uniform color would contain within its pictorial boundaries the tumult stirred by his hand. Closely examined, these areas show the full repertoire of his strokes; slathered zig-zags, suave sweeps, and dragged

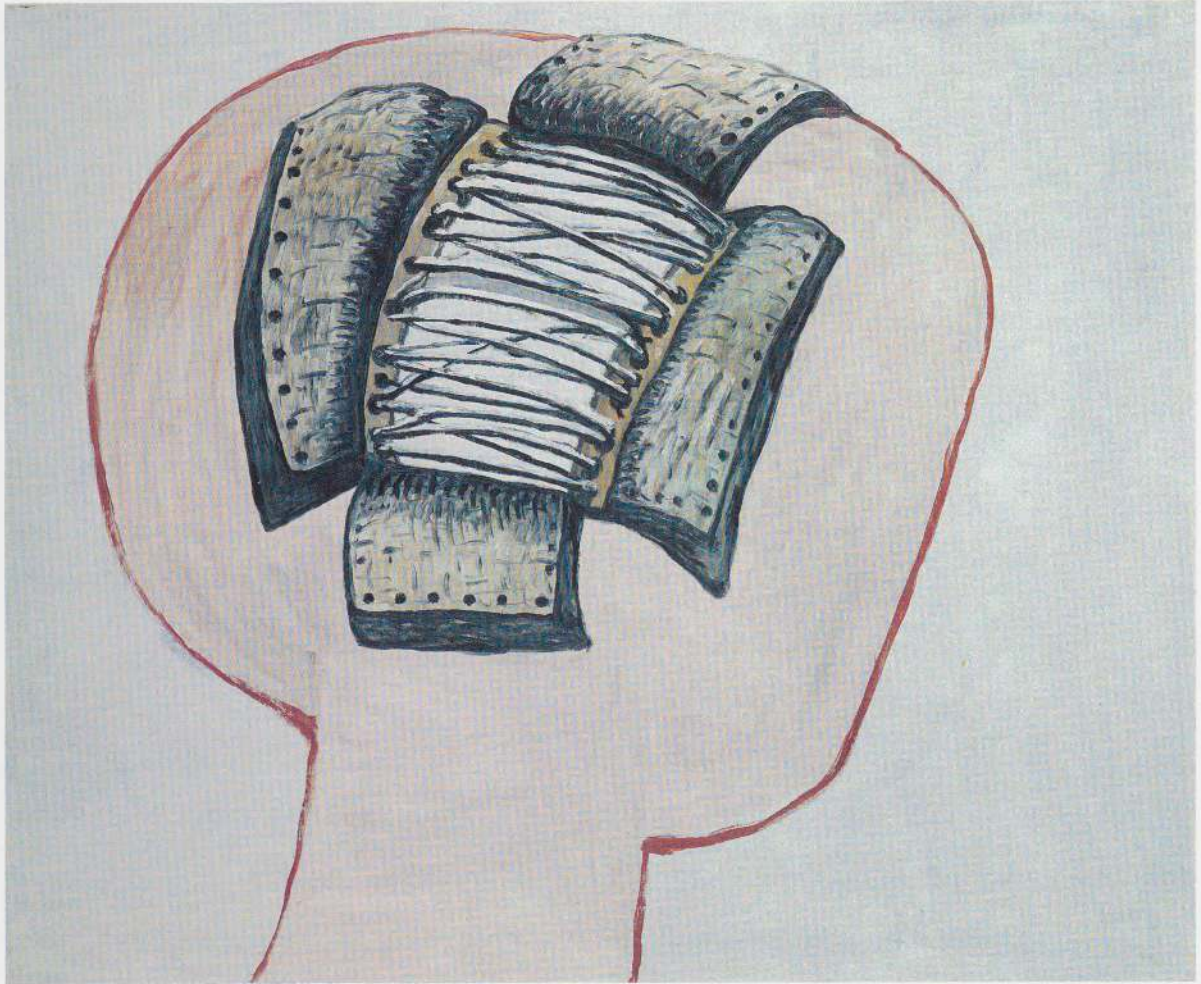
sticky pastes. Storyteller that he was, Guston understood that the best tales are those that resonate in the senses as well as in the mind, and so he rehearsed his gesture and extended its range like an actor practicing his lines in various vocal registers and at different volumes—from a dry whisper to a resounding laugh or a booming speech.

At the center foreground of *Box and Shadow* a spider is poised atop a nail-studded crate that casts a long evening shadow across a scorched wasteland. The location and contents of the box are unknown, as are the reasons for the spider being there. The choice and arrangement of symbols, recalling the hermetic still lifes of de Chirico, are enigmas—impenetrable but therefore inexhaustible points of focus for speculation. Though never a Surrealist, Guston, like de Chirico, counted on the imaginative friction generated by the juxtaposition of disparate objects to release their inherent poetry. The large dimensions of Guston's paintings deviate from the example of the Italian's generally small works, however, and significantly enhance their impact. In many ways a traditional painter, de Chirico confined the vastness of his dreams to the manageable, illusionistic space of the framed easel picture. Extending his visual and corporeal field of action to the scale of what Clement Greenberg called American-type Painting, Guston gave his visions an imposing physical presence, and his canvases a literal monumentality fully consonant with the depicted monumentality of his images.

In contrast to the sparseness of *Box and Shadow*, another work of the same year, *Tomb* (page 25), is a symbol dump—or, rather, a cairn or headstone. Piled on the shelves or steps of the black monolith that blocks the sky-blue horizon are an assortment of objects: a misshapen ball, an idle brush plunged into a paint can, a still-smoking cigarette, and tiers of luckless horseshoes that list and droop like rough iron analogs to the sleek soft watches in Salvador Dali's *The Persistence of Memory* of 1931. There all of Guston's objects sit as if the painter had just



Untitled (*Rome*, 1971). 1971. Oil, 22 x 30" (55.9 x 76.2 cm). Bequest of Musa Guston



Head. 1977. Oil on canvas, 69 1/2" x 7' 1" (176.5 x 215.9 cm). Bequest of Musa Guston

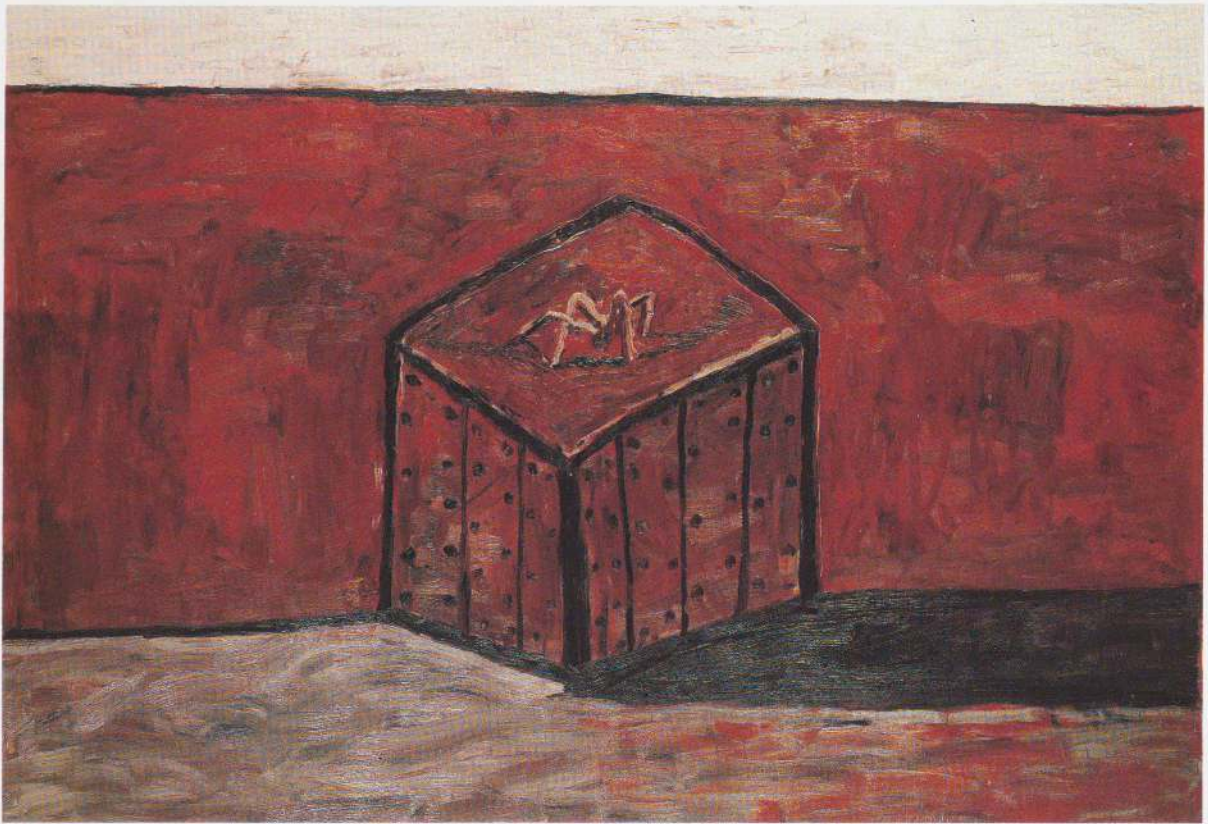
abandoned them; and there they stay on their pedestal, an epitaph composed of things instead of words. The dead weight of this accumulation is no accident. Typical of those items that surrounded him in the studio, each is a memento mori of the artist, and their ensemble constitutes a *vanitas*, a still-life reminder of the fatal inconsequentiality of human endeavor. Yet, never did Guston paint more vigorously than when contemplating his own mortality, and of the many works he devoted to the subject in his last years, none has greater force or mystery than *Tomb*. Loading his brush with liver grays, charred-bone blacks, and arterial reds, the artist delineated these congested iconic forms with a painterly draftsmanship of commensurate density. "Stapling" hatches onto worked tonal facets, binding edge against edge with pigment welds and figure to ground with pigment rivets until nothing moved, Guston labored in his studio like Vulcan forging a memorial from his own anvil.

In 1979 Guston suffered a near-fatal heart attack. Death had made itself known to him directly, and one of his responses was *East Coker T.S.E.*, 1979 (page 26). After limning a sickbed self-portrait, Guston recognized in it the likeness of T. S. Eliot, a favorite author. Suspended in the dismal gray murk of this intimate and comparatively small painting, the poet is seen in livid profile. With his creased, stubbly head on a comfortless pillow and his teeth bared, he stares upward into space. On his throat gathers a small blue cloud and from his nostrils seeps a sooty mist of the same blue, as if his last breath were escaping as we look. Among the most grotesque of Guston's late pictures, it is nevertheless the least cartoonlike. For all its physiognomic exaggerations—the hooked nose, huge ears, and heavily corrugated skin—the image is in fact disturbingly naturalistic. What gallows humor there is is not entirely Guston's. Death, after all, is the ultimate caricaturist. Under his sardonic hand the face of the dying is transformed; vital flesh retreats and less fragile features gain a ridiculous but definitive prominence. Grinning into

the void, the last laugh would seem to be Eliot's, however, as if the spiritually hypochondriacal poet were amused finally by the absurd simplicity of it all.

"In my beginning is my end," reads the first line of Eliot's poem *East Coker*, and as Guston faced his own end images of closure multiplied. Unable during his last months to attempt big canvases, Guston committed these images to paper, producing a large number of drawings, acrylics, and lithographs. Their facture and mood vary from brutal to elegiac; slush grays, dull blues and reds, and miserable yellows are pervasive, but in some cases these off-tones blush with crepuscular pinks, peaches, and purples. For all its variety the iconography of these pictures is consistent in emphasis. Neither whimper nor bang ended Guston's world but, instead, a general clatter punctuated by leaden thuds. Objects are responsible for most of the noise. Canvas stretchers, chair backs, coffee cups, bottles, cigarettes, and other studio junk are symbols of the artist, and the bent nails that rim the stretchers or stud other objects are the self-mocking stigmata of his vocation for aesthetic martyrdom. Garbage-pail tops held up like shields, hairy paws, stamping feet, and ominously clustered heads represent an intrusion into studio chaos of agents of the social chaos prevalent outside.

Scattered one by one over a bleak landscape or regrouped into ill-assorted clusters, all these random parts are emblematic of the disintegrating wholes to which they formerly belonged. Many of these objects represent verbs of motion, which their static positions qualify, like adverbs of inertia. In *Coat*, a lithograph of 1980 (page 31), the headless hulking shape of a man, similar in silhouette to the contours of *Tomb's* black mound, clasps old shoes to its side. They may have come from Buster Brown, but in their forlorn state they have all the poignancy of van Gogh's peasant boots; like his they are metaphors for their weary, absent owner, and their number is symbolic of his age and all the ground he has covered. Still other pictures feature legs entangled in ladders, Jacob's ladder perhaps, or maybe a vertical variant on the myth of



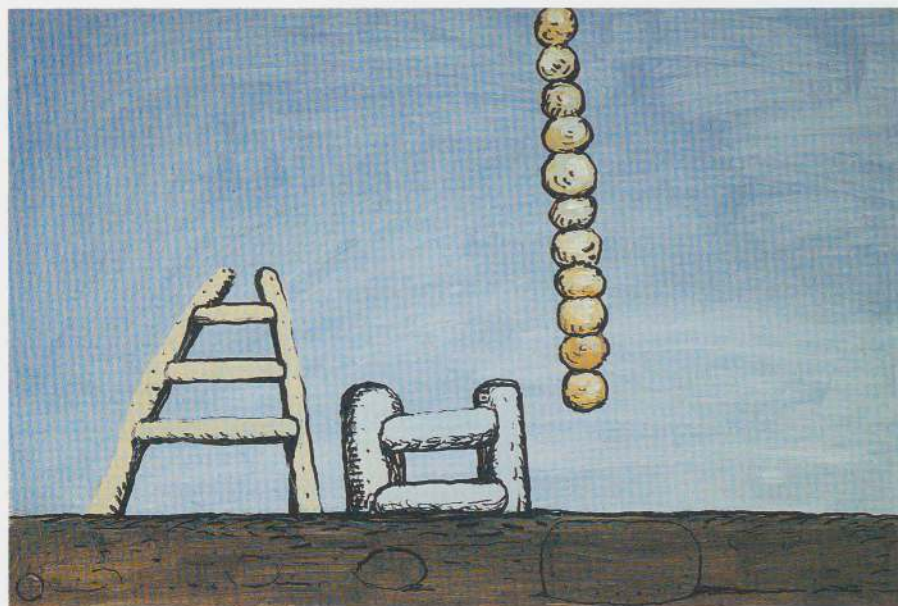
***Box and Shadow.* 1978. Oil on canvas, 69¹/₈" x 8' 2⁵/₈" (175.6 x 250.5 cm). Gift of Musa Guston**



Tomb. 1978. Oil on canvas, 6' 6¹/₈" x 6' 1³/₄" (198.4 x 187.6 cm). Acquired through the A. Conger Goodyear and Elizabeth Bliss Parkinson Funds and gift of the artist



East Coker T.S.E. 1979. Oil on canvas, 42 x 48" (106.7 x 122 cm). Gift of Musa Guston

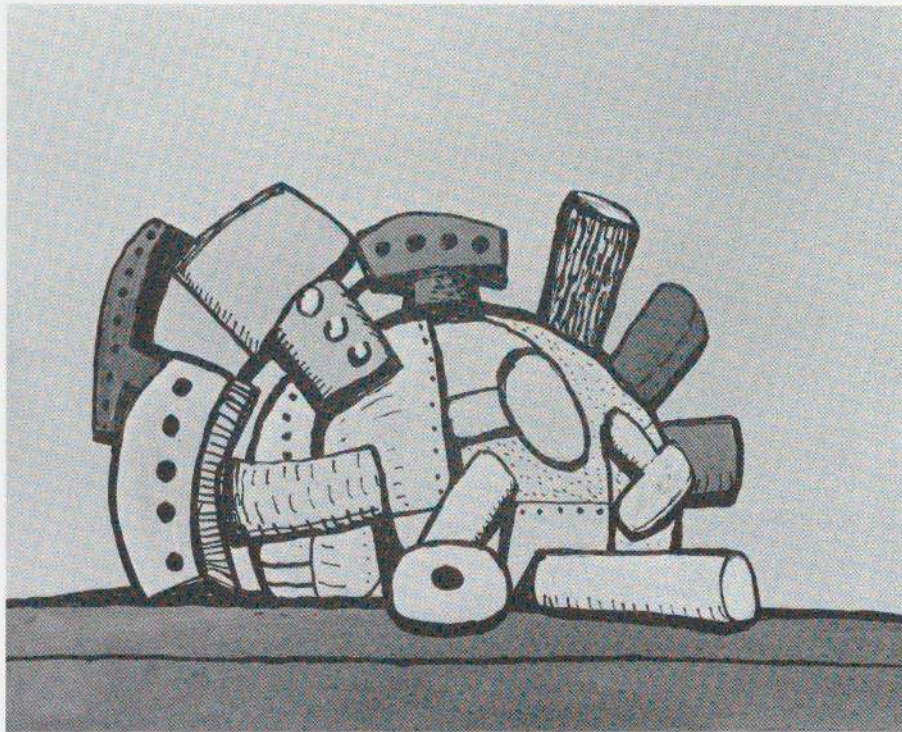


**Untitled. (1980). Synthetic polymer paint and ink on board, 20 x 30" (50.8 x 76.2 cm).
Gift of Mrs. Philip Guston**

Sisyphus. And, if the emblematic rendering of an old pressing iron Guston kept around his studio may be read as an omega—last letter of the Greek alphabet and sign of the end—then the conglomerates that loom over the barren spaces of numerous late drawings and acrylics are its pictorial analogs. Wheels are broken and their spokes torturously jammed together and embedded in the earth; balls come to a halt on steep inclines unable to roll further forward yet somehow not rolling back either. Like glacial erratics—huge boulders dropped by the melting ice on an otherwise empty horizon—they are both imposing and pathetically out of place.

Loneliness and effort haunt these inexplicable leftovers. In contrast to the formal lightness that characterizes the late styles of many artists, including Monet, Henri Matisse, and even his friend de Kooning, Guston's last works seem heavier than ever, even

though their facture shows the unlabored efficiency of a man who has all the know-how he needs and no time to waste. In Guston's final works life seems like a bad dream about weight, and feeling its full onus seems akin to finding oneself transported to a planet whose gravity is a hundred times that on earth. Representing the burden of a past that only increased as he struggled ahead, the artist's mysterious accumulations were his resource and his nemesis. Guston's will to bear that burden never flagged even when the strength necessary to do so drained away. The burst of graphic invention which concluded his creative life expressed that determination to the fullest. And, humor leavened his frustration and pessimism to the end. Among the small acrylics of 1980 is one showing a pull-chain hanging absurdly from the heavens as if to say, "When you leave, remember to turn out the lights." Too busy working, Guston left the lights on.



Untitled. (1980). Synthetic polymer paint and ink, 23 x 29" (58.4 x 73.6 cm).
Gift of Musa Guston

CATALOGUE OF THE COLLECTION

The following works by Philip Guston in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art are listed chronologically within each of three groups: Paintings, Drawings, and Prints and Illustrated Books. Dates enclosed in parentheses do not appear on the works themselves. Drawings, prints, and illustrated books are on paper unless otherwise noted. Dimensions are given in feet and inches and in centimeters, height preceding width; sheet size is given for drawings, composition size for prints, and page size for illustrated books. The means of acquisition of the work by the Museum is followed by its acquisition number. Works illustrated in this publication are indicated at the end of the entry.

PAINTINGS

Red Painting. 1950. Oil on canvas, 34¹/₈ x 62¹/₄" (86.4 x 158.1 cm). Bequest of the artist. 419.81. *Page 6*

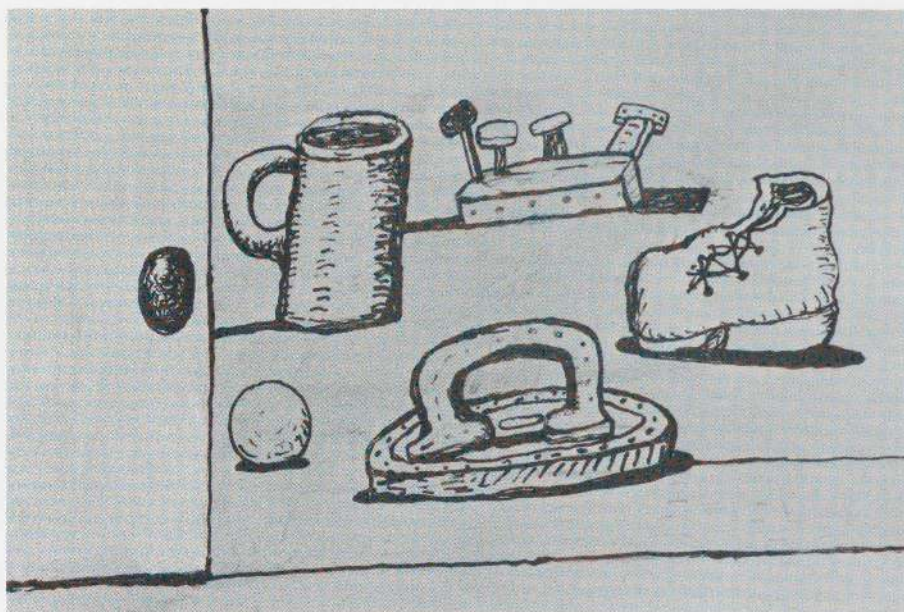
Painting. 1954. Oil on canvas, 63¹/₄ x 60¹/₈" (160.6 x 152.7 cm). Philip Johnson Fund. 7.56. *Page 9*

The Clock. 1956–57. Oil on canvas, 6'4" x 64¹/₈" (193.1 x 163 cm). Gift of Mrs. Bliss Parkinson. 659.59. *Page 11*

North. 1961–62. Oil on canvas, 69" x 6' 5" (175.3 x 195.6 cm). Gift of Musa Guston. 365.91. *Page 15*

City Limits. 1969. Oil on canvas, 6' 5" x 8' 7¹/₄" (195.6 x 262.2 cm). Gift of Musa Guston. 363.91. *Front cover*

Untitled. 1969. Synthetic polymer paint on panel, 30 x 32" (76.2 x 81.2 cm). Bequest of Musa Guston. 201.92. *Page 18*



**Untitled. (1980). Synthetic polymer paint and ink on board, 20 x 30" (50.8 x 76.2 cm).
Gift of Mrs. Philip Guston**

Head. 1977. Oil on canvas, 69¹/₂" x 7' 1" (176.5 x 215.9 cm). Bequest of Musa Guston. 200.92. *Page 22*

Tomb. 1978. Oil on canvas, 6' 6¹/₈" x 6' 1³/₄" (198.4 x 187.6 cm). Acquired through the A. Conger Goodyear and Elizabeth Bliss Parkinson Funds and gift of the artist. 60.81. *Page 25*

Box and Shadow. 1978. Oil on canvas, 69¹/₈" x 8' 2³/₈" (175.6 x 250.5 cm). Gift of Musa Guston. 362.91. *Page 24*

East Coker T.S.E. 1979. Oil on canvas, 42 x 48" (106.7 x 122 cm). Gift of Musa Guston. 364.91. *Page 26*

DRAWINGS

Untitled. (1955). Brush and ink, 17³/₄ x 22⁷/₈" (58.1 x 45.1 cm). Gift of Herbert Ferber. 702.76. *Page 8*

Head—Double View. 1958. Brush and ink, 20 x 24⁷/₈" (50.7 x 63.2 cm). Purchase. 130.84. *Page 12*

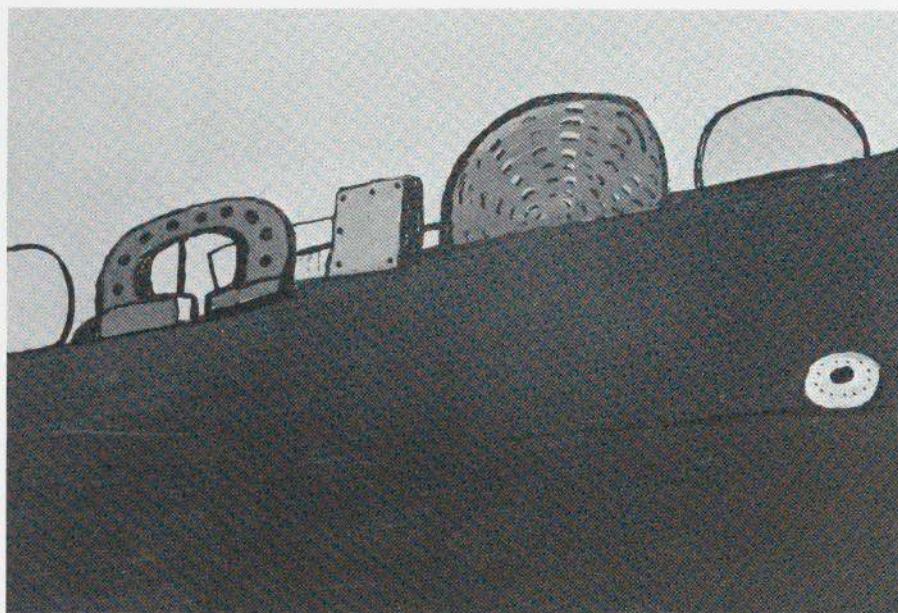
Wrapped. 1969. Pastel, 17¹/₄ x 21¹/₂" (43.7 x 54.4 cm). Purchase. 305.83. *Title page*

Untitled (*Rome, 1971*). 1971. Oil, 22 x 30" (55.9 x 76.2 cm). Bequest of Musa Guston. 202.92. *Page 21*

Untitled. (1980). Brush and ink, 18⁷/₈ x 26³/₈" (48 x 67.1 cm). Purchase. 131.84

Untitled. (1980). Synthetic polymer paint and ink, 23 x 29" (58.4 x 73.6 cm). Gift of Musa Guston. 620.87. *Page 32*

Untitled. (1980). Synthetic polymer paint and ink, 23 x 29" (58.4 x 73.6 cm). Gift of Musa Guston. 621.87. *Page 28*



Untitled. (1980). Synthetic polymer paint and ink on board, 20 x 30" (50.8 x 76.2 cm).
Gift of Musa Guston

Untitled. (1980). Synthetic polymer paint and ink on board, 20 x 30" (50.8 x 76.2 cm). Gift of Musa Guston. 622.87. *Back cover*

Untitled. (1980). Synthetic polymer paint and ink on board, 20 x 30" (50.8 x 76.2 cm). Gift of Musa Guston. 623.87

Untitled. (1980). Synthetic polymer paint and ink on board, 20 x 30" (50.8 x 76.2 cm). Gift of Musa Guston. 624.87. *Page 30*

Untitled. (1980). Synthetic polymer paint and ink on board, 20 x 30" (50.8 x 76.2 cm). Gift of Mrs. Philip Guston. 318.89. *Page 27*

Untitled. (1980). Synthetic polymer paint and ink on board, 20 x 30" (50.8 x 76.2 cm). Gift of Mrs. Philip Guston. 319.89. *Page 29*

Untitled. (1980). Synthetic polymer paint on board, 20 x 30" (50.8 x 76.2 cm). Gift of Mrs. Philip Guston. 320.89

Untitled. (1980). Synthetic polymer paint and ink on board, 20 x 30" (50.8 x 76.2 cm). Gift of Mrs. Philip Guston. 321.89

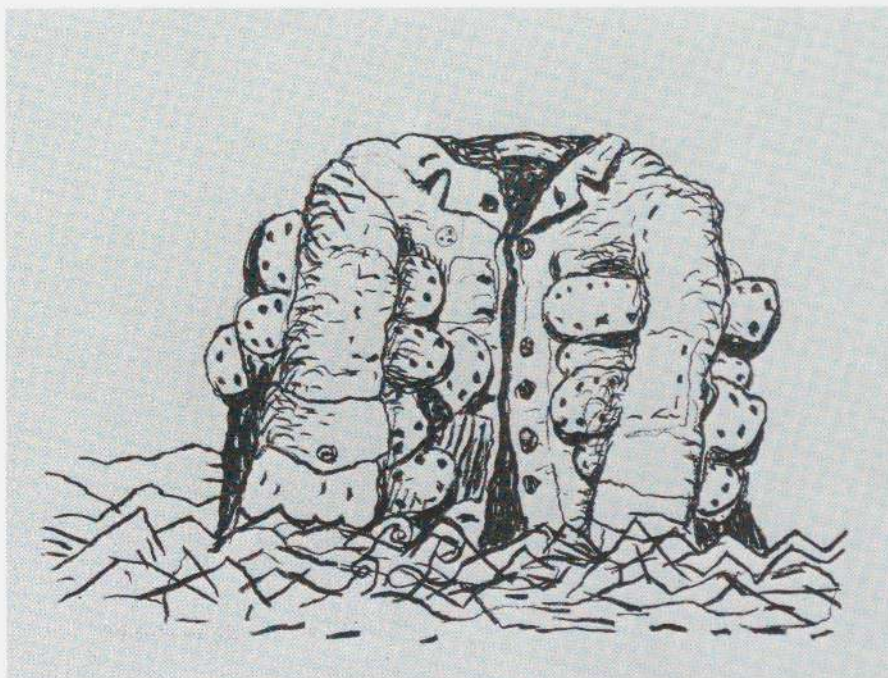
Untitled. (1980). Synthetic polymer paint and ink on board, 20 x 30" (50.8 x 76.2 cm). Gift of Mrs. Philip Guston. 322.89

PRINTS AND ILLUSTRATED BOOKS

Untitled. (June 20–26) 1963. Lithograph, 24⁵/₈ x 31³/₈" (62.5 x 79.7 cm). Gift of Kleiner, Bell & Co. 1095.67. *Page 14*

Untitled. (June 20–26) 1963. Lithograph, 21¹/₄ x 28³/₁₆" (54 x 71.5 cm). Gift of Kleiner, Bell & Co. 1096.67

August 1965 from the series *Four on Plexiglas*. (1965, published 1966). Screenprint, printed in color on Plexiglas, 29¹⁵/₁₆ x 39⁷/₈" (76 x 101.3 cm). Gift of Lester Avnet. 649.66



Coat. 1980. Lithograph, 23³/₄ x 37⁵/₈" (60.3 x 95.6 cm). John B. Turner Fund

Untitled. 1966. Lithograph, 19¹³/₁₆ x 29³/₈" (50.3 x 75.2 cm). John B. Turner Fund. 650.66

Nice. 1966. Lithograph, 18¹/₄ x 25⁵/₈" (46.3 x 65.1 cm). Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund. 6.86

Open Washes. 1966. Lithograph, 20¹⁵/₁₆ x 28⁹/₁₆" (51.6 x 72.6 cm). Gift of Associated American Artists. 7.86. *Page 16*

Sixteen drawings for *Ode to Michael Goldberg ('s Birth and Other Births)* for *In Memory of My Feelings* by Frank O'Hara. (1967). Ink on plastic, each: 14 x 11" (35.5 x 27.9 cm). Gift of the artist. 2202.67.20-35

Six plates for *Ode to Michael Goldberg ('s Birth and Other Births)* from *In Memory of My Feelings* by Frank O'Hara. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1967. Photolithographs, 12 x 9" (30.5 x 27.9 cm). Gift of The Museum of Modern Art Department of Publications. 92.68.26-31

The Street from the portfolio *Ten Lithographs by Ten Artists.* 1970 (published 1971). Lithograph, 19¹³/₁₆ x 26³/₈" (50.7 x 67 cm). Gift of Dr. Samuel Mandel. 522.84. *Page 17*

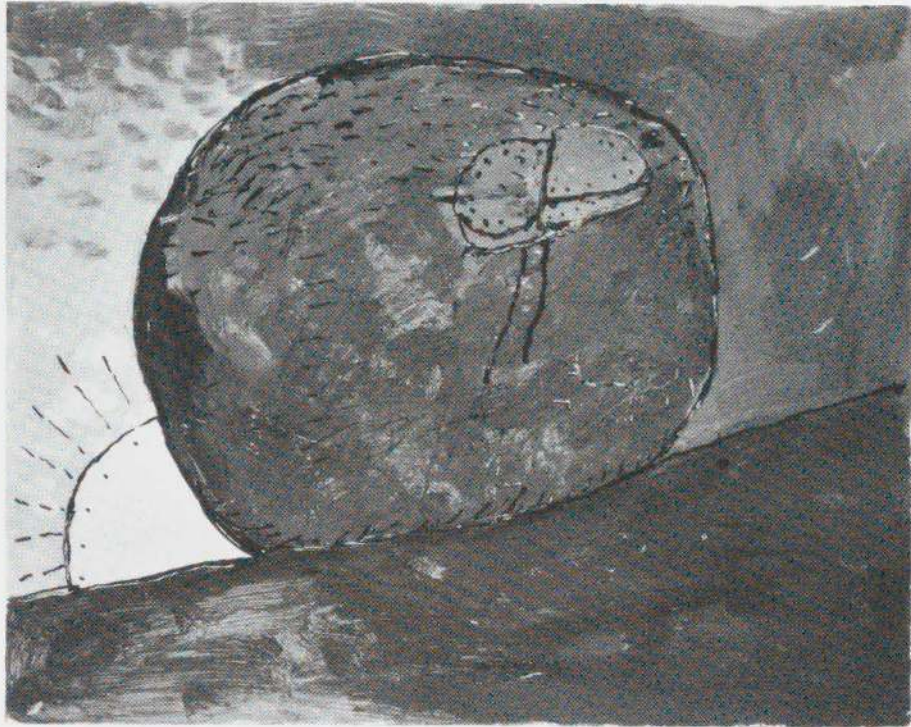
Coat. 1980. Lithograph, 23³/₄ x 37⁵/₈" (60.3 x 95.6 cm). John B. Turner Fund. 155.81. *Page 31*

Room. 1980. Lithograph, 28⁷/₈ x 39⁷/₈" (73.3 x 101.3 cm). Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Philip A. Straus. 156.81

Remains from the portfolio *Eight Lithographs to Benefit the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts, Inc.* (1980, published 1981). Lithograph, 19³/₈ x 29¹³/₁₆" (49.9 x 75.7 cm). The Associates Fund. 421.87.2

Gulf. (1979, published 1983). Lithograph, 28¹/₈ x 38³/₄" (71.5 x 98.5 cm). Jeanne C. Thayer Fund. 352.87

Painter. (1979, published 1983). Lithograph, 29¹/₂ x 39¹³/₁₆" (75 x 101.2 cm). Purchase. 353.87



Untitled. (1980). Synthetic polymer paint and ink, 23 x 29" (58.4 x 73.6 cm).
Gift of Musa Guston



