

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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A rare opportunity to explore the paintings and drawings of Arshile Gorky (1904-1948), a precursor of "Abstract Expressionism" and the "New York School," is offered in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art on view from December 19 through February 12. William C. Seitz, Associate Curator of Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions, has assembled 121 preparatory studies and finished compositions from public and private collections here and abroad, and grouped them in the exhibition to reveal their interdependence.

Gorky, whose real name was Vosdanig Manoog Adoian, was born in Armenia in 1904. He came to the United States in 1920, at the age of 16. His first five years here were spent in Massachusetts and Rhode Island. At the age of 21 he came to New York where he lived for many years. During the forties he moved to Sherman, Connecticut where, after a series of misfortunes, he ended his life by suicide at the age of 44.

While Gorky was still painting, few realized how influential his art was to become; but during the fourteen years between his death and his retrospective exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 1962, Gorky's position in American and world art had been securely established. The exhibition at the Biennale was itself an unusual honor as it was presented at the request of the Biennale authorities. Lloyd Goodrich, Director of the Whitney Museum organized that show with Ethel Schwabacher acting as advisor.

In the accompanying book*, Seitz points out that no two spectators will interpret Gorky's poetic imagery in the same way. "Of more value than seeking the origins of each unit," he suggests, "is an understanding of Gorky's metamorphic method. As he proceeded he was willing to substitute any one ideogram for another, or to abandon it completely. Instinctively, he seems to have been moving toward the realization that a given configuration can resemble, let us say, a leaf, the wing of a bird, or a pointed Armenian slipper; that behind the practical catalogue of specific objects and organisms lies a convergent vocabulary of universal forms."

Gorky's work falls into two main groups; portraits painted between 1926 and 1937, which are shown in one large gallery, and the larger body of work that divides into an apprenticeship period during the twenties--when he strove to make qualities he admired in the art of Ingres, Cézanne, Picasso and other artists his own--the development of an original and personal style in the thirties, and the mature work

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*Arshile Gorky: Paintings, Drawings, Studies by William C. Seitz. 56 pages, approx. 100 black and white photographs, 2 color plates. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Distributed by Doubleday and Co., Inc. \$2.50.

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dating from the summer of 1942 until the artist's death in 1948.

The dozen portraits and drawings from 1926 to 1936 in the current exhibition include The Artist and His Mother (1926-36) considered the climax of Gorky's figure painting. According to Seitz, it is one of the rare masterpieces of modern portraiture, worthy of comparison with Picasso's Gertrude Stein or Kokoschka's Herwarth Walden. The double portrait is shown with the photograph which inspired it, the first pen sketches, and a large drawing in pencil, marked off with numbered squares-- a traditional method of enlarging drawings used repeatedly by Gorky later.

The work from the thirties on view includes five versions of Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia, two versions of Image in Xhorkom, and Painting which was purchased by the Whitney Museum in 1937 and was therefore the first painting by Gorky to enter a major public collection.

Five works, of which the 1941 canvas in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art is the most ambitious, relate to the Garden in Sochi theme on which Gorky worked from 1940 to 1942. Although Sochi is the name of a Russian resort city on the Black Sea, the garden was in fact part of Gorky's father's farm on the shore of Lake Van. It was an uncultivated orchard that had become overgrown and heavily shaded. In it, Gorky recalled, was a large dead tree, and a blue rock emerging from black earth and moss, both of which were believed by the villagers to have supernatural powers. On "The Holy Tree" were fastened strips which passers-by had torn from their clothing, and women came to rub their bared breasts against the rock-- a means, it would appear, of inducing fertility.

Again and again art has been revitalized by a return from abstraction to nature, either historically or within the life of an individual artist, as it was with Gorky. In 1942 he renewed his contact with landscape and it was continued during the summer of 1943, when he and his wife Agnes visited her father's farm in Hamilton, Virginia. "Gorky's unique morphological sense" Seitz points out, "made him able to see nature in visual metaphors rather than generic categories. He saw universal shapes, configurations and structures which were common to flowers, insects, humans, crustaceans and other genera and at the same time expressive of his own psychic pressures and processes."

The Liver is the Cock's Comb (1944), the largest and one of the most splendid of Gorky's paintings, is a lavishly enriched enlargement of a drawing done in the summer of 1943. "Some of the hypnotic power of both drawing and painting derives from the ambiguity of their multiple imagery," Seitz comments.

At the time Gorky returned to nature he was influenced by Kandinsky and Matta, and in 1944 was often with André Breton, Julien Levy (his friend and dealer) and

the surrealists. The paintings of that year are his closest approach to unplanned improvisation.

In January 1946 Gorky's studio in Connecticut was destroyed by fire. At least 27 paintings were lost. The titles of Charred Beloved I and II, painted in New York shortly after, can be thought of as commemorative. In February of the same year Gorky was operated on for cancer. During 1946 he underwent crushing blows to his physique, his personal life and his art. Agony, the tragic and beautiful canvas from the Museum of Modern Art Collection, is the outcome of these pressures. Unlike other pictures of the period, it was not systematically developed from one master drawing but was preceded by several bold studies which are in the exhibition.

The exhibition continues with studies and paintings on the theme of The Plough and the Song (1947), The Betrothal (1947), Soft Night of the same year and Dark Green Painting (1948). It is concluded by Last Painting (1948).

After the New York showing, the exhibition will travel to Washington, D. C. where it will be shown at the new Washington Gallery of Modern Art.

Photographs and additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Publicity Director, Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York 19, N. Y. Circle 5-8900