

The Museum of Modern Art

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The largest exhibition ever assembled of works by artists of the "first generation" of new American painters and sculptors will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from June 18th through October 5th.

THE NEW AMERICAN PAINTING AND SCULPTURE: THE FIRST GENERATION consists of 157 works, all of which are either in the Museum Collection or promised to it as future gifts. The Museum has long owned more works by this pioneer generation of American artists than it has had space to exhibit. In the last few years it has made additional important acquisitions and has received many works as gifts and promised gifts through the generosity of the artists themselves, their families, and many private collectors, friends and Trustees of the Museum. In order to show these works in proper depth and range the Museum's collection of twentieth-century painting and sculpture, which usually occupies two floors, has been reinstalled on the third floor so that the second floor galleries could be devoted to this period.

Since 1945 America has been the scene of a succession of artists of world importance and prominence. The role of rescuing American art from its heretofore provincial situation and placing it at the center of the modern tradition fell to the generation of artists shown in this exhibition. Almost all the artists represented here belong to the generation born before the end of the first World War, and all established their mature styles within the decade following the end of the second. The chronology of their developments, however, varied considerably. Jackson Pollock, born in 1912, made important contributions to the art of the early forties, whereas Morris Louis, who was born in the same year, arrived at his mature style--the so-called veil paintings--only in 1954; David Smith, born in 1906, made important sculptures by 1945, while Reuben Nakian, born in 1897, made his first monumental sculpture in 1954. The only artists

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in this exhibition not of the generation born before 1918 are Hans Hofmann (b.1880), who became an important painter only late in life, and Theodoros Stamos (b.1922), who made a significant contribution to the art of the forties as a very young man.

Among the pioneers in this first generation one can discern different stylistic groupings and successive phases of development. But taken together, the art of the painters in this generation can be distinguished from that of the painters who came of age in the later fifties. Although their work differs markedly in style, common qualities of spirit and attitude unite such painters as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman and set them off from such "second generation" abstract painters as Ellsworth Kelly, Kenneth Noland, and Frank Stella. (This despite affinities of a purely formal order which relate artists in both generations according to other possible groupings.) In the coming year the Museum will be exhibiting many of its new acquisitions of works by younger American and foreign artists; and its two major painting and sculpture retrospectives--those of Claes Oldenburg (opens September 22, 1969) and Frank Stella (opens March 23, 1970)--are also devoted to the work of this younger generation.

In THE NEW AMERICAN PAINTING AND SCULPTURE: THE FIRST GENERATION the works of 42 artists are represented in varying numbers: these will make it possible to follow the development of many artists over extended periods, in some cases more than a quarter century. Along with works by painters of the forties such as Arshile Gorky, with their affinities to biomorphic Surrealism, the exhibition contains early paintings and sculptures by artists better known for their later, more abstract styles. The mythological and totemic concerns of artists such as Pollock, Rothko, and Gottlieb, Lipton and Ferber, interests which in the early forties paralleled to some extent the "peinture-poésie" of late, abstract Surrealism, remained implicit in their work even as they later purged it of figurative metaphors. This poetic content, enhanced by the exploitation of techniques of automatism, made it possible for American artists to "open up" the inherited language of abstraction--largely Cubist and Fauvist in derivation--and preserve what was viable in those styles in a new, more visionary and more monumental form of abstract painting.

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William S. Rubin, Curator of Painting and Sculpture, selected the paintings and installed the exhibition; William C. Agee, Associate Curator, selected the sculpture. They point out in the accompanying brochure that the exhibition is the latest in a series of recently inaugurated exhibitions which are made up solely of works of art in the collection of the Museum or promised to it. The 1960s (1967), Word and Image (1968), and Jean Dubuffet (1968) were such exhibitions. They observe:

These exhibitions differ from major loan shows in that they in no way imply completeness in a historical sense. However, they enable the Museum to bring before the public many works of art that are not continuously on display, and permit the opportunity to show these works in new contexts which expand their meaning and significance....

They continue:

So different did the art of the first generation pioneers seem collectively from the painting that preceded it, so much did it imply common goals, a common revolutionary 'élan,' a common disengagement from middle-class values, that it was soon accorded the status of a movement and baptized with a variety of names. Of these 'Abstract Expressionism' and 'Action Painting' became the most commonly used. Both terms allude to characteristics that are indeed found in the work of some of the group. But both are also misleading. Their primary fault is that they imply that these painters shared either a common style (Abstract Expressionism) or a common method or posture (Action Painting). Such implications have militated against an appreciation of the individual nature of the contributions.

The title of the exhibition--THE NEW AMERICAN PAINTING AND SCULPTURE: THE FIRST GENERATION--derives from the title "The New American Painting," which was used for the large-scale group exhibition of some of these artists which circulated through Europe during 1958 and '59 under the auspices of the International Council of The Museum of Modern Art, and was shown at the Museum during the summer of 1959. The virtue of that title was that it alluded to certain essential aspects of the work while avoiding the dubious connotations that adhered to other names that had been attached to it. In the decade since that exhibition there has been in America more new art, of very different spirit and character; hence the addition of the subtitle "The First Generation."

The development and historical chronology of sculpture differed considerably from that of painting during this period. Mr. Agee notes:

The first generation of sculptors is marked by a diversity of style and technical means which, unlike the situation in painting, divided this generation into several essentially unrelated parts. In addition to such sculptors as Smith, Hare, and Roszak who worked in the open, linear, pictorial, direct metal sculpture, which roughly parallels in spirit and approach the painterly abstraction of Pollock, de Kooning, and Gottlieb, others, such as Noguchi and Lippold, continued the traditional method of direct carving and extended the possibilities opened up by the

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European Constructivists. Although chronologically they belong to the first generation, they stand apart from the methods and approach that distinguish the sculptors included in this exhibition. Because of the physical and technical problems of the medium, sculptors frequently--and traditionally--are slower to develop their mature styles. Thus, a number of sculptors--Nevelson, Kohn, Rickey, and Agostini, for example--although born before World War I and chronologically part of this first generation, only reached their maturity after 1955 and with Stankiewicz both stylistically and conceptually form the nucleus of a distinct 'second generation.'

This exhibition will provide the first opportunity in New York City to see the work of this generation in depth in a decade, and provides the largest representation in numbers and artists ever assembled, despite the fact that the show is limited to the Museum collection and works committed to it.

The exhibition will result in a publication, the first in a series of book-catalogues devoted to various portions of the Museum's collection. It will contain a catalogue of the Museum's holdings of this generation of American artists and a section of plates with illustrations of the works in black and white and color. In addition it will contain an extensive text on the paintings by William S. Rubin and an essay on the sculpture by William C. Agee. Because their texts will be illustrated with works of art in other collections, the book will serve as a general introduction to the work of this generation of artists.

Photographs and additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019. 956-7501, 7504.