

The Museum of Modern Art

11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

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WILLEM DE KOONING by Thomas B. Hess, a comprehensive study in mid-career of the artist many critics and collectors consider the most important painter at work in the middle of our century, has been published by The Museum of Modern Art.

Accompanying the major exhibition of the same title, recently on view at the Museum, and now traveling, this book provides the first opportunity to follow the development of de Kooning's work as a whole, beginning with his first mature works of the mid-1930's and ending with a large painting unfinished in November 1967.

The complex nature of de Kooning and his work is described with great sensitivity by Mr. Hess in his text, which is in the form of a chronological commentary. Without drawing definitive conclusions, Mr. Hess explores de Kooning's experimentation with various techniques, the emergence of his explosive Abstract-Expressionist manner, his paintings of women and the eventual fusion of these figures in landscapes. Central to de Kooning's art, according to Mr. Hess, is his creative and revolutionary use of ambiguity.

With de Kooning still hard at work, Mr. Hess's monograph remains open-ended: "Fortunately, art cannot be explained, only felt. The newer it is, the stronger we feel it, and the less able we are to account for its power. Thus, comment on de Kooning's pictures since 1963 must be tentative, even though they are among the most convincing of all his work. The recent work itself is best seen as a heterogeneous group, involving many different concepts, many of them contradictory, being pushed along simultaneously."

Mr. Hess, who organized the de Kooning retrospective for The Museum of Modern Art under the auspices of the Museum's International Council, is the editor of Art News. He is the author of Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase (1951), and has written monographs on de Kooning published in 1959 and 1967.

One hundred and fifteen illustrations (16 in color) include paintings, drawings, pastels, and collages -- many of which have been seldom reproduced. The book also contains the only three texts ever written by Willem de Kooning, including "What Abstract Art Means To Me";

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one of his rare interviews; complete catalogue of the exhibition; comprehensive bibliography; and index.

De Kooning, after studying art at the Rotterdam Academy of Fine Arts and Techniques in Holland, smuggled his way to the United States in 1926. First working on commercial art jobs and for the Federal Art Project (W.P.A.), he finally decided to paint in 1935. Covering the period prior to the artist's first one-man show in 1948, when he was relatively unknown, Mr. Hess describes the movement of modern painting led by de Kooning, which emerged in New York in the 1940's: "What had happened was that the New York artists...changed the basic hypothesis of art. It can be described (in a simile) as a shift from aesthetics to ethics; the picture was no longer supposed to be Beautiful, but True -- an accurate representation or equivalence of the artist's interior sensation and experience. If this meant that a painting had to look vulgar, battered, and clumsy -- so much the better."

After his one-man show in 1948, de Kooning's fame and influence increased, as he continued his periodic swings between figure painting and abstraction, which became uniquely fused in his style. De Kooning, who has lived in The Springs on Long Island since 1963, has been elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and was awarded the President Freedom Award at the White House.

The Museum's retrospective, which this book accompanies, is the most comprehensive exhibition ever assembled of de Kooning's work, and was first shown at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and then at The Tate Gallery in London. The show is currently on view at The Art Institute of Chicago through July 6, and will be exhibited at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from July 29-September 14, 1969.

WILLEM DE KOONING by Thomas B. Hess
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