

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
December 1987

GIFTS OF WORKS ON PAPER BY ROBERT MOTHERWELL

December 11, 1987 - February 23, 1988

An exhibition celebrating two important gifts to The Museum of Modern Art by the major Abstract Expressionist Robert Motherwell opens at the Museum on December 11, 1987. GIFTS OF WORKS ON PAPER BY ROBERT MOTHERWELL includes a selection of drawings donated by the artist from his own collection; and the recently published Three Poems by Octavio Paz, illustrated by Motherwell and donated by the publisher, The Limited Editions Club, New York. Organized by John Elderfield, director of the Department of Drawings, and Audrey Isselbacher, assistant curator, Department of Prints and Illustrated Books, the exhibition continues through February 23, 1988.

Drawing and printmaking play an essential role in the art of Robert Motherwell, and the works in this exhibition span the artist's entire career. The earliest drawings on view are those from his Mexican Sketchbook of 1941, made during a trip to Mexico with the Surrealist painter Matta, which first revealed the influence of automatic drawing on his art. The latest work on view is a recently completed drawing of 1987.

Among the highlights of the exhibition is Motherwell's first Elegy drawing from 1948. Made to illustrate a poem by Harold Rosenberg, it is one of the artist's most seminal works, for it established the counterpoint of ovals and uprights that formed the basis of his series of Elegies to the Spanish Republic. Other later drawings from the Elegy series are included in the exhibition as well.

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Also represented are drawings from other major series by the artist. Among these are examples from the severely reductive Open series, that began in the mid-sixties; the rich and elaborate Drunk with Turpentine series; and the gestural Lyric Suite of 1965, which shows the most spontaneous aspect of his art. These--together with a selection of unique drawings that are not made within series--provide an overview of the extraordinary thematic and technical range of his work on paper.

The twenty-six lithographs in black and white and color that comprise Three Poems are brilliant illuminations of Octavio Paz's powerful verse. The poems selected for the book were written in Mexico in 1971, after Paz had spent twelve years abroad. Confronted with the urban nightmare of Mexico City, he responded with some of his most moving work. One poem "The skin of the world, the sound of the world" takes its title from a statement Motherwell had made about his own art years before. The other two poems contained in the book are Return and San Ildefonso Nocturne.

The Limited Editions Club asked Motherwell to illustrate one of its books, and in 1982 he suggested the collaboration with the Mexican poet. Motherwell began to develop his illustrations, which capture the disquieting mood of Paz's poetry, by referring to drawings that were originally conceived for an anthology of Frank O'Hara poetry, published by The Museum of Modern Art in 1967.

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