

The Museum of Modern Art

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THE DRAWINGS OF PHILIP GUSTON

September 8 - November 1, 1988

The first major retrospective of drawings by American artist Philip Guston (1913-80), one of the seminal figures of Abstract Expressionism, opens at The Museum of Modern Art on September 8, 1988. Organized by Magdalena Dabrowski, associate curator in the Department of Drawings, THE DRAWINGS OF PHILIP GUSTON reveals the full breadth of Guston's artistic achievement through his distinctive draftsmanship. Guston himself considered drawing of critical importance to his work and throughout his fifty-year career alternated between intense episodes of painting and drawing.

On view through November 1, 1988, the exhibition is made possible by generous grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art. Additional funding has been provided by the New York State Council on the Arts. The accompanying publication has been supported in part by grants from Jeanne C. Thayer and Edward R. Broida.

The exhibition includes 153 works on paper surveying the development of Guston's career through its three distinct phases: the early figurative works of the thirties and forties; the linear, black-and-white abstractions of the fifties and sixties; and the last works of 1968-80, in which he returned to figuration. For Guston, the rapid, almost instinctive nature of drawing eased his transition into new stylistic phases and catalyzed his periods of discontent into new creativity. In the exhibition catalogue, Ms. Dabrowski writes that Guston's drawings "have a certain almost obsessive quality of trying to come to grips with an unmanageable profusion of thoughts and images.

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Looking at them, we do not simply contemplate the results of this process but instead are forced to reenact the artist's struggle to create."

One of Guston's earliest drawings, a study for the painting Conspirators (1930), executed when he was just seventeen, depicts a pack of Ku Klux Klansmen huddled beneath hanged and crucified figures. It is the first appearance of the hooded figure, a motif which reappears in his late works. Subsequent works introduce other recurring iconographic motifs, including reclining heads, intertwined legs, nail-studded shoes, and flatiron shapes. The ink study for the painting Tormentors (1947-48) introduces line already disembodied from form in a linear composition that clearly anticipates the nonobjective work soon to follow.

Guston's drawings of 1950-51, done in quill pen and ink, are already completely abstract. Lyrical, evocative, and spiritual, they express the formal and philosophical aspirations of Abstract Expressionism. In some works, he emphasizes "the mark"--the stroke of the brush or pen--creating a network of strong verticals and horizontals; in others, he develops a more calligraphic style. These two techniques are the foundation of Guston's draftsmanship and are adapted, alone and in combination, in each successive stage of his art.

By the late fifties, Guston had grown disenchanted with abstraction. He began concentrating on drawings and gouaches in which vigorous lines gradually enclose and define shapes. In the delicate pen-and-ink drawings of the mid-sixties, recognizable forms emerge with clarity and economy. During this period, he continued to vascillate between reductivist "pure" drawings and drawings of objects--books, shoes, buildings, hands--heavily outlined in charcoal or brush and ink.

Guston unequivocally returned to figurative art in 1968. His drawings of 1968-70 introduce a very private, introspective imagery which is nonetheless

profoundly moralistic and expressive of universal themes. Deeply affected by the social and political unrest of the time, he revived the hooded figure and placed it in urban settings, using a cartoon style at once comical and menacing. This work was first shown in New York in 1970 and received almost uniformly negative criticism.

The final drawings are disquieting images that convey Guston's despair. Largely autobiographical, they reveal a new self image--a large disembodied head dominated by a single bulging eye. Others depict the heaped up refuse of everyday life--the artist's recurrent iconography. Powerfully portraying the enigmas of the human psyche, these works have exerted a singularly vital and formative influence on many younger artists working in a neo-figurative idiom.

Raised in Los Angeles, Philip Guston began drawing at the age of twelve and initially intended to become a cartoonist. He attended the Manual Arts High School, but was expelled in 1929, along with his friend Jackson Pollock, for circulating caricatures. Except for another brief period of study at the Otis Art Institute, Guston was essentially self-taught.

From 1932 to 1940, Guston painted murals around the country for the Works Projects Administration (now mostly destroyed). He completed his first mature canvas in 1941 and, in 1945, began to achieve critical success, including a first prize for painting from the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh and a one-person exhibition in New York. A Guggenheim Fellowship in 1947 allowed Guston to move to Woodstock, New York. At this time, he renewed his friendships with Pollock, Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, and Willem de Kooning.

During a year-long tour of Europe on a Prix de Rome and an American Academy of Arts and Letters grant (1948-49), Guston studied Renaissance painting, influenced in particular by the work of Piero della Francesca. In 1950 he settled in New York City, entering the intellectual and artistic circle

later known as the New York School. Among his closest associates were Frank O'Hara, John Cage, and the critic Harold Rosenberg. Represented by the Sidney Janis Gallery, Guston's work was shown at the Bienal de São Paulo (1959) and the Venice Biennale (1960) and was included in exhibitions at The Museum of Modern Art (1956 and 1958), the Guggenheim Museum (1962), and The Jewish Museum (1966).

In 1970 Guston was elected a member of the American Academy in Rome, where he was artist-in-residence. He was also elected a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1972) and received the Distinguished Teaching of Art Award from the College Art Association (1975). Guston died of a heart attack in Woodstock in 1980, shortly after the opening of a major retrospective of his work at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Following its New York showing, the exhibition will travel to Museum Overholland, Amsterdam (January 16 - February 26, 1989); Fundación Caja de Pensiones, Madrid (March 30 - May 14, 1989); the Oxford Museum of Modern Art, England (May 28 - July 23, 1989); Douglas Hyde Gallery, Trinity College, Dublin (August 9 - September 16, 1989); and Rome (venue to be announced), (October - November 1989).

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