

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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Press Preview

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Following a successful year-long tour in Europe, the exhibition called "The New American Painting" will be on view at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, from May 28 through September 8. This is the first time that the Museum's International Program has shown in New York one of its exhibitions which has traveled abroad. The exhibition is supplemented by a mural-size map illustrating the entire scope of the Museum's exchange program which during the past seven years has included 461 showings of 60 exhibitions of painting and sculpture, architecture and design, prints, photographs and films in 51 countries.

"The New American Painting" consists of 81 works by 17 artists selected and installed by Dorothy C. Miller, Curator of the Museum Collections. Organized in response to repeated requests from European institutions for an exhibition devoted entirely to abstract expressionism in America, the exhibition was shown in 8 countries during 1958-59 under the auspices of the International Council at the Museum of Modern Art, a group of art patrons and community leaders from various parts of the United States.

Artists in the exhibition, each represented by four to five major paintings, are: William Baziotes, James Brooks, Sam Francis, Arshile Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, Philip Guston, Grace Hartigan, Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Theodoros Stamos, Clyfford Still, Bradley Walker Tomlin and Jack Tworkov. The selection was made and the exhibition prepared early in 1958, with the intention of showing the central core and major marginal talent of the movement which has generally been called abstract expressionism throughout the world.

Commenting in the New York catalog on the European critics' reactions to the exhibition, Porter A. McCray, Director of the International Program, notes that "the paintings created a sensation; whether enthusiastically, hesitatingly, in the form of back-handed compliments or real hostility, it was acknowledged that in America a totally 'new'--a unique and indigenous--kind of painting has appeared, one whose influence can be clearly seen in the works of artists in Europe as well as in many other parts of the world." Further indication of the success of these "ambassadors" is shown by the increasing number of purchases of American work for public and private collections abroad, as well as by the large attendance at the exhibition during its tour. The Tate Gallery in London reported a record number of paid admissions while "The New American Painting" was on view.

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Most critics commented on the immense size of the canvases, on the feeling of momentum, on the sense of adventure and on the apparent dedication of the artists. A few found the pictures meaningless scrawls, but the majority were enthusiastic in their praise.

Will Grohmann, well-known critic and scholar, writing in Der Tagesspiegel in Berlin, said "They are painters without regard for the ready-made world. What they paint is real; it is the spectator himself who must have a certain amount of imagination in order to comprehend. Without an actual consciousness of the universe this is not possible. Here, there is no comfort, but a struggle with the elements, with society, with fate. It is like the American novel; something happens, and what happens is disquieting and at the same time pregnant with the future."

In his introduction to the exhibition catalog, which was reprinted in the various languages for each showing, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Director of the Museum Collections, points out that the briefest glance around the exhibition reveals a striking variety among the paintings and that the artists themselves are uncompromising individualists. What then, he asks, unites these paintings:

"First, their size. Painted at arm's length, with large gestures, they challenge both the painter and the observer. They envelop the eye, they seem immanent. They are often as big as mural paintings, but their scale as well as their lack of illusionistic depth are only coincidentally related to architectural decoration. Their flatness is, rather, a consequence of the artist's concern with the actual painting process as his prime instrument of expression, a concern which also tends to eliminate imitative suggestion of the forms, textures, colours and spaces of the real world, since these might compete with the primary reality of paint on canvas.

"As a consequence, rather than by intent, most of the paintings seem abstract. Yet they are never formalistic or non-objective in spirit. Nor is there (in theory) any preoccupation with the traditional aesthetics of 'plastic values,' composition, quality of line, beauty of surface, harmony of colour. When these occur in the paintings--and they often do-- it is the result of a struggle for order almost as intuitive as the initial chaos with which the paintings begin.

"Despite the high degree of abstraction, the painters insist that they are deeply involved with subject matter or content. The content, however, is never explicit or obvious even when recognizable forms emerge....Rarely do any conscious associations explain the emotions of fear, gaiety, anger, violence or tranquility which these paintings transmit or suggest.

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"In short, these painters, as a matter of principle, do nothing deliberately in their work to make 'communication' easy. Yet in spite of their intransigence, their following increases, largely because the paintings themselves have a sensuous, emotional esthetic and at times mystical power which works and can be overwhelming."

The works of art in the exhibition were lent by 31 private collectors, five galleries and three museums, including the Museum of Modern Art, which lent 17 paintings from its own collection. During the European tour "The New American Painting" was seen in Basel, Milan, Madrid, Berlin, Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris and London. It was transported to and from Europe without charge by the United States Lines.

12 of the artists have been featured in the series of American exhibitions presented periodically at the Museum under the direction of Dorothy Miller: Gorky and Motherwell were included in 14 Americans (1946); Baziotes, Pollock, Rothko, Still and Tomlin in 15 Americans (1952), and Brooks, Francis, Kline, Hartigan and Guston in 12 Americans (1956).

The International Program, which organized "The New American Painting," was established in 1952 by a 5-year grant from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. In 1957 the International Council at the Museum of Modern Art was formed to sponsor The International Program. The financial contributions of the Council, the continued support by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and additional funds raised for special projects have made it possible for the Program to increase and expand its activities.

Members of all departments of the Museum of Modern Art contribute their services to these exhibitions and many individuals and institutions within and outside the United States have given assistance. To date work by 420 American painters, sculptors and printmakers has been shown in these various exhibitions in addition to work by hundreds of designers, architects, film makers and photographers.