

# NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

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THEMATIC WORKS OF SEVEN AMERICAN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISTS  
TO BE SHOWN AT GALLERY'S EAST BUILDING OPENING

WASHINGTON, D. C. February 14, 1978. A special exhibition featuring the work of seven major American artists of the abstract expressionist movement, American Art at Mid-Century: The Subjects of the Artist, will be one of the major shows at the opening of the National Gallery of Art's East Building on June 1.

Comprised of sixty-three paintings, drawings and sculptures, this exhibition will illustrate a particular theme or subject pursued by each artist in a concentrated creative period or in a series of works over a longer span of time: Arshile Gorky's The Plow and the Song series; Willem de Kooning's Women; Robert Motherwell's Elegies to the Spanish Republic; Barnett Newman's The Stations of the Cross; Jackson Pollock's classic poured paintings of 1950; Mark Rothko's Brown and Gray paintings; and David Smith's Voltri sculptures.

Three of the works on view in this exhibition are among the National Gallery's recent acquisitions - the large grisaille version of The Plow and the Song by Gorky purchased with funds from the Avalon Fund, Pollock's Lavender Mist and Smith's Voltri VII, both purchased with the Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund.

The exhibition has been organized by E. A. Carmean, Jr., the Gallery's Curator of Twentieth-Century Art. The catalogue accompanying the exhibition

will include essays on each of the artists and his series by Mr. Carmean, Eliza Rathbone, Assistant Curator of Twentieth-Century Art, and Thomas B. Hess, noted author and critic.

The exhibition will be installed in the East Building's upper level galleries on the north side parallel to Pennsylvania Avenue. Designed by Gaillard F. Ravenel, the installation will demonstrate the flexibility of the new building's galleries. Varying ceiling heights on this uppermost floor will permit the natural light that is appropriate for Smith's Voltri series, Motherwell's Elegies, and Pollock's work. Gallery walls have been constructed especially to set each group apart.

#### Gorky's The Plow and the Song series

The theme of the fertility of man and nature dominates this series. A lyric beauty pervades the works with combinations of lush colors - violet, red, yellow and white in varying intensities. The lines of the original forms transform from one version to the next, as does their movement from foreground to background, yet each painting never loses the entire original composition. Done between 1944 and 1947, three paintings and two drawings from this series will be on view. The paintings are the only ones from this series extant and are considered among Gorky's finest work.

#### de Kooning's Women

Following a period of abstract compositions at the end of the 1940s de Kooning turned his attention to the female figure in six major works done between 1950 and 1953, which comprise the Women series. In these paintings, de Kooning has drawn on the traditional figure of a woman seated or bathing as his subject matter. The figures are constructions made of various

visual fragments of the human form, which often come from separate studies or tracings of earlier studies of a particular work. In creating these female constructions, de Kooning was inspired by works of Picasso and Rembrandt. The lenders to this section include the Australian National Gallery and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran, Iran.

#### Motherwell's Elegies to the Spanish Republic

The paintings selected for this group represent the four phases of a compositional schema Motherwell has explored over a thirty-year period. Although the works consist predominantly of somber black rectangles, oblong and round forms on a white background, Motherwell often introduced color into the composition, such as the blue, yellow, red and buff in Elegy to the Spanish Republic, No. 34. Nine paintings and one drawing will be included of the approximately twenty major works the artist has painted in this series.

#### Newman's The Stations of the Cross

This dramatic series consists of fourteen paintings, one for each of the Stations of the Cross, on raw canvas, with black or white modulating stripes of varying widths extending from top to bottom of the picture. This series culminates in a fifteenth painting, Be II, which introduces a cadmium red edge on one side and a black, hard stripe on the other side, with white paint replacing the bare canvas. Painted between 1958 and 1966, these fifteen works have been lent by the artist's widow.

#### Pollock's Poured Paintings

The central subject of these famous poured paintings is order over chaos. The six paintings in this group were done in 1950, a "classic" period of Pollock's work when he demonstrated an extraordinary control of the

dripped paint and the introduction of thematic variations. Among the wall-size pictures Pollock painted during this period in this section will be Number 32 (Kunstammlung Nordrhein - Westfalen, Düsseldorf), One (The Museum of Modern Art), and Lavender Mist (National Gallery of Art).

#### Rothko's Brown and Gray Series

Painted in Cape Cod during the summer of 1969, the eight works in this group have never been exhibited before. The works were executed in oil and acrylic, on large sheets of paper. Peculiar to this series of works is the clear definition of the edges of the field, which Rothko achieved by taping the length of each edge before applying the paint. Each painting consists of two registers; in the lower one, he applied a layer of delicate pink, and over the pink he brushed gray. In the upper one, he then applied ochre, and over this an umber so that the result is a warm yellowish-brown glow reminiscent of Rembrandt. Among Rothko's last works, they were executed soon after the completion of the paintings for the Rothko Chapel in Houston and reflect a similarly somber mood, but a new direction in his work in composition, scale and technique.

#### Smith's Voltri Sculptures

Smith created twenty-six sculptures for the annual festival in Spoleto, Italy in less than a month in the summer of 1962. The sculptures are collages with the images wrought from raw steel and ready-made objects Smith found. Working in Italy in an abandoned steel factory in Voltri, he used pieces of scrap metal found in the factory as well as forms he cut himself. Many of the sculptures reflect a classical influence: the Gallery's Voltri VII is

based on antique cart wheels, with the pattern on the wagon's spine perhaps inspired by forms from an Etruscan sarcophagus. Thirteen of the Voltri sculptures will be installed in the north tower gallery on steps reminiscent of the ancient Spoleto amphitheater, for which the series was commissioned. The ceiling in the north tower will be raised to nearly its full height of thirty-five feet, allowing daylight to pour in and to give a sense of the outdoors for which the sculptures were created.

A checklist of works in the exhibition will be sent on request.

Among other exhibitions at the opening of the East Building will be:

Piranesi: The Early Architectural Fantasies

Aspects of Twentieth-Century Art: I. Picasso and Cubism;  
II. European Painting and Sculpture; III. Matisse -  
Cutouts and "Jazz"

Small French Paintings from the Bequest of Ailsa Mellon Bruce

Master Drawings and Watercolors from the National Gallery  
Collection and Promised Gifts

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION or photographs contact Katherine Warwick, Assistant to the Director, or Pamela Jenkinson, Information Office, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C. 20565, area code 202, 737-4215, ext. 224.