

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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"WILLEM DE KOONING: PAINTINGS"

FEATURING MAJOR WORK IN THE ARTIST'S CAREER

OPENS AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY ON MAY 8, 1994

Washington, D.C. -- Honoring the ninetieth birthday of Willem de Kooning, one of America's greatest artists, the National Gallery of Art will present the first major exhibition devoted exclusively to his paintings. Organized by the National Gallery in association with the Tate Gallery, London, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Willem de Kooning: Paintings will bring together seventy-six of the artist's finest works from institutions and private collections in the United States and Europe.

The exhibition opens May 8, 1994, and continues through September 5, 1994, in the Gallery's East Building. The paintings selected, which range in size from small oils on paper to large canvases over six-and-a-half feet tall, represent de Kooning's highest and most original achievements in painting from the late 1930s to the mid-1980s. The exhibition is made possible by J.P. Morgan & Co. Incorporated.

"As the twentieth century draws to a close, it is fitting to look anew at the work of one of the most influential painters of our era," said Earl A. Powell III, director of the National Gallery. "The exhibition will trace the astonishing evolution of this masterful artist, who continued to reinvigorate the art of painting with remarkable energy and diversity over five decades."

Added Dennis Weatherstone, chairman of J.P. Morgan, "It is a privilege for us to sponsor this major exhibition, first in Washington and subsequently in New York and London, and thereby to honor the work of this great American artist."

The exhibition is organized both thematically and chronologically, beginning with de Kooning's first series of paintings of men and women, which establishes the importance of the human figure in the artist's work. One of the most remarkable aspects of de Kooning's career has been his ability to move between figurative and abstract styles with such seemingly contradictory modes developing concurrently. The early figures are followed by a selection of de Kooning's acclaimed black-and-white and color abstractions from 1948-1950, culminating in the monumental painting Excavation, exhibited at the Venice Biennale of 1950 and not included in an exhibition devoted to de Kooning since 1968.

At the height of the abstract expressionist movement, de Kooning startled the art world with a group of provocative paintings of women, rendered in a vigorously expressionistic style. The exhibition at the Gallery will present a number of these paintings of women, including the famous Woman I (1950-1952). For these images, de Kooning drew on sources ranging from Mesopotamian figures to contemporary advertisements, resulting in works that prompted a storm of critical reaction.

In the 1950s de Kooning also produced a series of highly abstract urban and highway landscapes based on his experiences of New York City and the roads connecting the city to Long Island, where he began to spend more and more time. Paintings such as Montauk Highway (1958) demonstrate the boldly simplified formats

and virtuoso brushwork of these compositions.

In 1963, the artist moved permanently to Springs, Long Island, where he designed his own spacious, light-filled studio. Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s he created another great series of women as well as lush paintings of figures in landscapes. Such works as The Visit (1967) or Woman in Landscape III (1968) demonstrate de Kooning's extraordinary facility for manipulating paint to expressive ends through a process that involved dripping, scraping, layering, and constant reworking of his medium.

In 1975 de Kooning began a new series of dense, richly colored abstractions inspired by the reflective world of light and water in East Hampton. Six years later at the age of seventy-seven he turned in yet another direction, creating a series of calligraphic, predominantly white canvases that are among the most luminous he ever produced. These late works, which demonstrate de Kooning's ultimate synthesis of figuration and abstraction, of painting and drawing, and of color and line, constitute a powerful ending to the show.

Willem de Kooning was born on April 24, 1904, in Rotterdam. Following formal studies in fine and applied art at the Rotterdam Academy, he emigrated to America at age twenty-two. In New York he initially supported himself as a house painter and commercial artist. During the 1930s he enjoyed close friendships with fellow painters Stuart Davis, John Graham, and Arshile Gorky and painted murals for the WPA/Federal Arts Project before devoting himself full-time to a career as an artist in 1936.

De Kooning's first solo exhibition was held in 1948 and by 1950 he had become a key figure in the influential abstract expressionist movement or "New York School." Over the course of his career de Kooning has been recognized with many prestigious awards and prizes, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964.

Willem de Kooning: Paintings has been selected by Marla Prather, associate curator in the Gallery's department of twentieth-century art; David Sylvester, English art historian and critic; and Nicholas Serota, director of the Tate Gallery. The exhibition will be accompanied by a fully illustrated, scholarly catalogue with essays by Prather, Sylvester, and Richard Shiff, professor of art history, University of Texas at Austin. The exhibition has enjoyed the support of the Willem de Kooning Conservancy in New York, which has made available the artist's archives and holdings of his work. An indemnity for the exhibition has been granted by the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

After closing at the Gallery, the exhibition will travel to The Metropolitan Museum of Art from October 11, 1994, through January 8, 1995, and the Tate Gallery from February 16 through May 7, 1995.

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