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Beautiful and Provocative Images of the Female Form in First Comprehensive Survey of Willem de Kooning's Drawings of Women

Washington, DC--**Willem de Kooning: Tracing the Figure**, a comprehensive survey of the artist's drawings on paper depicting the female form, will be on view in the East Building of the National Gallery of Art, from September 29, 2002, through January 5, 2003. Widely regarded as one of the great pioneers of abstract expressionism, de Kooning is known for the vividly abstract figure-based paintings and drawings that placed him at the center of the New York School. The exhibition features 66 works produced between 1938 and 1955.

"The Gallery presented in 1994 a major exhibition of de Kooning's paintings. Now, we are extremely pleased to be showing his drawings," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "They reveal de Kooning grappling with issues that would reappear in his paintings."

EXHIBITION ORGANIZATION

In **Willem de Kooning: Tracing the Figure** the assembled works on paper, organized around themes found in the critical early years of de Kooning's exploration of the female figure, illustrate the artist's struggle to eliminate traditional barriers between drawing and painting. Ranging from his early surrealist-inspired portraits of Elaine de Kooning and Juliette Brauner in 1938, to the drawings of 1955, when the figure dissipates into abstraction, the works incorporate a variety of media, including graphite, charcoal, pastels, and oil on paper.

The exhibition highlights key pastels from 1952-1953 that were the centerpiece of de Kooning's 1953 exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery, in New York. Many of the original 16 works on paper will be exhibited together for the first time since that groundbreaking exhibition. To many, this group of pastels and charcoals represents the pinnacle of de Kooning's examination of the female form.

His first series of women, approximately 1938-1944, revealed the influences of his formal training and highlighted thematic dualities such as tradition and modernism, geometry and automatism, figuration and abstraction. Between 1945 and 1946, de Kooning's semi-abstract works, which included color and collage elements, contributed to an increasingly noticeable tension between flatness and an illusion of depth. It is during this period that the double figure drawings began to emerge. As de Kooning's figural compositions developed, geometric configurations were transformed into architectural elements, as in *Two Women* (1952).

In 1951, de Kooning suspended his simultaneous work on abstract and figurative forms and returned to depictions of women. The anatomy of these women disintegrates into a cross layering of brushwork. The effect created by the size and intentional vulgarity of the images establish an almost violent sensuality—an exaggeration of gender parallel to the ubiquitous calendar girl of the time. But de Kooning's turbulent gestural style belies the artist's meticulous re-working of his paintings and drawings.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Willem de Kooning was born April 24, 1904, in Rotterdam, Holland. Following formal studies in fine and applied art at the Rotterdam Academy, he emigrated to America at age 22. In New York he initially supported himself as a house painter and commercial artist. During the late 1920s and 1930s he developed friendships with fellow painters Stuart Davis, John Graham, and Arshile Gorky, and painted murals for the Federal Arts Project before devoting himself full-time to a career as an artist in 1936.

He is best known for a provocative series of paintings of women, whose aggressive forms are rendered with slashing strokes and dripping paint. Throughout his long and prolific career, his painting oscillated between the figurative and the purely abstract,

eventually dissolving anatomy into abstraction. His work places him in the tradition of figurative artists such as Eugène Delacroix, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Paul Cézanne, and Pablo Picasso. His first retrospective exhibition came in 1968 at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. In 1985, the artist received the National Medal of Arts in the United States. De Kooning died March 19, 1997, on Long Island.

CURATORS, CATALOGUE AND RELATED ACTIVITIES

Willem de Kooning: Tracing the Figure has been organized by The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

The national tour of **Willem de Kooning: Tracing the Figure** has been sponsored by Wells Fargo.

Generous support has also been provided by The Sydney Irmas Exhibition Endowment; Maria Hummer and Bob Tuttle; the National Endowment for the Arts; Genevieve and Ivan Reitman; Audrey M. Irmas; Beatrice and Philip Gersh; The Mnuchin Foundation; and Betye Monell Burton.

The exhibition is accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue copublished by MOCA and Princeton University Press. *Willem de Kooning: Tracing the Figure* features 85 color plates and essays by MOCA chief curator Paul Schimmel and MOCA curator Cornelia Butler, who both served as the exhibition's co-curators, as well as leading art historians Anne Wagner and Richard Shiff. Additional support for the exhibition catalogue has been provided by the Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation.

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General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets along Constitution Avenue NW and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. With the exception of the atrium and library, the galleries in the East Building will be closing gradually beginning in July 2013 and will remain closed for approximately three years for Master Facilities Plan and renovations. For specific updates on gallery closings, visit www.nga.gov/renovation (<http://www.nga.gov/renovation>) .

For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's website at www.nga.gov. Follow the Gallery on Facebook at www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt and on Twitter at twitter.com/ngadc.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

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