

Adolph Gottlieb and Art in New York in the 1930s

Sanford Hirsch

The paintings Adolph Gottlieb created between 1941 and 1953, which he labeled "Pictographs", are fashioned out of a synthesis of cultural material that this artist selected and combined in ways that were totally new. Important as individual paintings and for their impact on other artists, the Pictographs mark a major change in the way modern societies understand paintings. They are, among other things, a critical link between European modernism and American abstract expressionism. While much research has been done recently on the painters of the New York School in the mid to late 1940s, this work by definition leaves out the origins of Gottlieb's paintings, which by that time were being widely exhibited and acquired by major public and private collections. The evolution of post-war American art, especially that group known as abstract expressionist, has its roots in the 1930s - the decade in which these artists were maturing. What we can find by looking to that earlier period is a view of artists working and developing in America in ways far more complex than the commonly held account that little of importance existed on the western shores of the Atlantic until major European artists were forced into exile there in the early 1940s.

For anyone in the arts, or with an interest in world culture, New York in the 1930s and early 1940s was a dynamic center of activity. The idea that it was a provincial town isolated from the great cultural centers of Europe seems to have been predominant among the art establishment of the time, and can account for the feelings of insecurity and uncertainty expressed by many American artists and writers. The most curious fact about this misperception is that it persists in historical writings about the period, and thus prevents an accurate view of what artists in New York were exposed to and how that influenced their later development. This view is critical in an essay about Adolph Gottlieb's Pictographs, which owe so much to both European and non-European sources that were accessible to him and his peers.

The Pictographs are a digest of cultural images and ideas, drawn from a remarkable spectrum of sources. European modernism, classicism, Native American pottery, sculpture and weaving, Jungian theories of universal archetypes, Freudian theories of the unconscious, surrealism, Oceanic and Melanesian carving and painting, African sculpture, the idiosyncratic theories of John Graham, the art of Pablo Picasso, the writings of James Joyce, and myriad other sources were combined and applied through the medium of the Pictographs. In effect, the Pictographs represent an attempt to contain and reflect, through purely visual means, the experience of one individual in the modern world. They achieve this end by transforming depiction, language, color, and design into coequal, interchangeable indicators, which exist as integral parts of a new kind of painting. As such they anticipate several of the changes that were necessary for the mature painting styles of many American painters who created their most popular work in the later 1940s and early 1950s. For Gottlieb's peers, the Pictographs were an important step away from European ideas about painting.

Gottlieb was a dedicated artist, born, raised and active in New York City, who had been exhibiting with progressive American artists since 1929. His interest in European art had led him on two trips there, in 1921 (at age 17) and again in 1935, which made him

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unique among his contemporaries. Gottlieb travelled widely throughout France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, and Holland seeking to gain familiarity with works of art, in the manner of a young professional aiming at increased knowledge of his chosen field. He was intent on seeing as much of what bore the label of art as he could, regardless of whether it was ancient or modern, European, African, American, or Asian. During his 1921 trip, he visited Paris (where he lived for about six months), Berlin, Vienna, Prague, Dresden, and Munich.¹ Each of those cities, at the time, had major collections of ancient, tribal, classical, and modern art. The 1935 excursion included a visit to the Musée Royale d'Afrique Centrale in Tervuren (near Brussels), the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, and the trip was extended so that Gottlieb could see a major exhibition of Italian painting from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries, which was held at the Petit Palais.² At the end of that trip, according to Esther Gottlieb, she and her husband used the money intended for their last meal in France to purchase three African sculptures.³

The New York to which the Gottlieb's returned in 1935 was a hotbed of cultural activity. The art critics of *The New York Times*, Edward Alden Jewell and Howard Devree, regularly complained of the difficulty of keeping up with changing trends and rapidly blending sources. The Museum of Modern Art had embarked on an exhibition program committed to showing contemporary works of art as well as the concepts that contributed to their existence. Several private galleries, including Buchholz, Pierre Matisse, Julien Levy, and Valentine specialized in showing contemporary European modernists. The art scene was not as large as that in Paris, but major works of European contemporary artists were available, in significant numbers and grouped according to a variety of themes. While the criticisms may have been questionable, reviews of these exhibitions were prominently displayed on the art pages of the major newspapers. In other fields, the works of Joyce, Pound, and Eliot were well known and well read; Martha Graham's dances with sets by Isamu Noguchi, a wholly American product, were revolutionizing the art of dance; American film and theater were thriving; and the mostly African-American idiom of jazz was becoming a commonplace of mainstream society.

The series of Pictograph paintings that Adolph Gottlieb began in 1941 originate in this cultural activity. His goal in these paintings was to place himself as an informed and intuitive artist at the center of the creative moment and, by doing so, to reach beyond what he viewed as the academicism that was stifling the art of painting. Gottlieb recalled his state of mind on starting the Pictographs:

My personal feeling was that I was sort of repelled by everything around me...I was caught between the provincialism of the American art scene and the power of what was happening in Europe. And I felt that as an individualist I had to resist what was happening in Europe because I wanted to be my own man...this left me in somewhat of a

1. While there is no documented itinerary of Gottlieb's 1921 trip, his visits to these cities are based on his later notes, and on markings of books purchased during that trip. He mentions having visited these cities in an August, 1962, interview with Martin Friedman on file at the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation. It is likely that he travelled to other areas as well; however, no evidence of such travels have been located.

2. Esther Gottlieb, conversation with Sanford Hirsch, January, 1979.

3. Esther Gottlieb, conversation with Sanford Hirsch, January, 1979.

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dilemma...And I must admit that in the 30s I was sort of caught on the horns of this dilemma...trying to steer a course which would enable me to find myself and do what I felt was something that would be of some significance or anyway related to what I felt was a high standard.⁴

I. SIGNS OF THE TIMES

In the early 1930s, a small group of American artists tried to establish an independent role for themselves, and move away from the prevailing styles of regionalism, social realism, surrealism, or abstract painting. The impulse was not new to them, and several of Gottlieb's generation may have inherited this spirit from the American artists of a previous generation who were their teachers, like Robert Henri and John Sloan. Adolph Gottlieb, along with such friends as David Smith, Milton Avery, John Graham, and Mark Rothko, had access to a broad range of cultural activity in New York. Various trends and ideas were represented in museum exhibitions and art galleries; many new and challenging ideas in the arts, sciences, and cultural studies were flooding into the city as critics, writers, curators, and other established authorities were rushing to define and categorize them. This was occurring at a time in the lives of Gottlieb and his peers when each was beginning to clarify the direction of his or her art. The reactions and evolution of each artist was quite different; but the common thread of an informed and emotional rejection of the major styles of the times, along with the strong drive to succeed as artists, created a forum for discussion and a sharing of values, if not a united program.

At least a few of these artists shared the idea that contemporary European art did not exactly reflect their interests or sensibilities. In the struggle to forge their own identities, some of these Americans considered the art produced by their European colleagues as an obstacle to be overcome, rather than a pinnacle of creativity to be attained. It is revealing to read David Smith's reference to an issue of *Minotaure* bought while he was in Paris in 1935 as "not so good - nature crap", or Dorothy Dehner, at the time married to Smith, writing in the same year that "*Minotaure* is coo-coo." In the same year, painter Clyfford Still wrote "I realized I would have to paint my way out of the classical European heritage. I rejected the solution of antic protest and parody (Picabia, Duchamp and the theorist Breton) or of the adaptations of the idioms of exotic foreign cultures (Picasso, Modigliani)...."⁵ These statements declare the reactions of artists with a developing sense of values that was simply different from those of their European contemporaries. Gottlieb stated in a 1962 interview that "I didn't want to go in that direction [surrealism] because the concept was too derivative...and I didn't want to be a surrealist any more than I wanted to be a figurist."⁶

Part of the difference, and some tension, between the Americans and their European colleagues had to do with the politics of the art world in New York in the 1930s. A review of

⁴. In an interview with Andrew Hudson, "Dialogue with Adolph Gottlieb - May, 1968," verbatim transcript on file at the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation pp. 2 - 4.

⁵. **quoted in *Clyfford Still* (John P. O'Neill, editor), 1979: New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. At the time, Still had his first prolonged exposure to New York, spending the summers of 1934 and 1935 at the Yaddo artist colony in Saratoga Springs.**

⁶. Adolph Gottlieb, unpublished interview with Martin Friedman, August, 1962, on file at the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation.

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the exhibition listings of that decade confirms that very few Americans were shown at major galleries or museums. Exceptions were sometimes made for American artists who fit a predetermined style deemed acceptable. For example, in the later 1930s and early 1940s, American art was accepted if it was regionalist or social realist; the type of work Arshile Gorky later referred to as "poor art for poor people,"⁷ and that Gottlieb labeled "the Corn-belt academy"⁸. American surrealists had a brief chance to exhibit in the late 1930s, but were invariably compared to the Europeans and judged by the critics to be, at best, worthy practitioners of an approved form. Similarly, the American Abstract Artists, a group dedicated to the ideal of a pure, plastic art, which was born in Europe in the 1910s had some limited success; but the Baroness Hilla Rebay, who championed the style and ran the Museum for Non-Objective Art (later to become the Guggenheim Museum), preferred the purer European product.

American artists who wanted to participate as equals in developing an idea of modern art were relegated to a few small galleries. This situation was somewhat improved with the opening of Peggy Guggenheim's "Art of this Century," but that was not until 1942 and while it provided an alternative, it could not match the exposure or seriously alter the prevailing mass of established opinion which kept many serious American artists out of public view. The situation was obliquely referred to by Stuart Davis in a letter published in *The New York Times* on October 12, 1941. Davis responded to an article in which New York dealer Samuel Kootz declared that he had not seen any good, new American art in a decade. Agreeing that Kootz was probably correct in claiming not to have *seen* American art of high quality, Davis went on to argue that the reason the best new American art was not being shown was because of

the vast hierarchical superstructure that makes its living, or enhances its prestige, on the work of the artist. This group, because of its ownership of all the important channels of art distribution, both economic and educational, constitutes a real monopoly in culture....The power of this group to dictate art policy and standards is enormous, and the artist has no voice whatever in its decisions.⁹

Davis' assertion is borne out by the exhibition records of the 1930s. The major venues were dominated by European artists.¹⁰

⁷. quoted in Anfam, David, *Abstract Expressionism*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1990, p. 54.

⁸. letter to *The New York Times*, June 13, 1943, section 2, p. 9 (co-authored by Mark Rothko).

⁹. Stuart Davis, letter to *The New York Times*, Oct. 12, 1941.

¹⁰. **The overwhelming majority of contemporary artists shown at major New York galleries of the period, like Seligmann, Pierre Matisse, Julien Levy, Westermann, Marie Harriman, and Valentine, were European. The attitudes of those who shaped American opinion toward American artists is demonstrated by some lines of E.A. Jewell's in a half-page article in *The New York Times* of Sunday, August 14, 1938. Jewell's article is about "...the subject of American art -- asking, in the first place, whether it really does exist, and, if so, why the European critics have been able to discern such scant evidence of the fact". Jewell seems to believe "If so many of our artists (I had been tempted to say most of our artists) prefer the easier course of parroting and aping to the harder course of coming to grips with the essentials of their own selfhood, how can we expect to advance evidence 'for the rise**

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The situation was not lost on Gottlieb and his colleagues. In 1935, a group of painters joined together to hold discussions and organize exhibitions of their own work. Taking the name "The Ten", the original group included Rothko, Joseph Solman, Naum Tschacbasov, Ilya Bolotowsky, Ben-Zion, Louis Harris, Yankel Kufeld and Louis Schanker, along with Gottlieb.¹¹ These young artists shared a sense that neither pure abstraction nor detailed representation were the proper direction for contemporary art. While each had a different approach to painting, and the approach of each artist changed and matured over the five years they exhibited together, they all worked toward an expressionist, slightly abstract style¹². Responding to the bias against progressive American art in the museums and galleries, they organized one of their exhibitions in protest to the policies of the Whitney Museum of American Art which concentrated on regionalist and social realist themes. Called *Whitney Dissenters*, the catalog text of that exhibition notes "The title of this exhibition is designed to call attention to a significant section of art being produced in America....It is a protest against the reputed equivalence of American painting and liberal painting."¹³ The Ten exhibited as a group from 1935 until 1940.

While American artists were having a hard time being exhibited in museums and commercial galleries, there was no shortage of modern European painting on view in New York. For most of the decade, there were two discernible trends in the galleries which showed works of modern artists. Many claimed a certain legitimacy by exhibiting the work of contemporary artists, but only work that was several years old and thus could claim a pedigree. A few more adventuresome dealers showed the most recent and challenging work. The Museum of Modern Art, which opened its doors in 1929, organized numerous exhibitions based on pertinent and challenging contemporary ideas, not simply showing the latest work, but examining the concepts and motivations which underlay the work. Even though there was much activity, and the art of contemporary Europe was available in large number and variety, there was a basic conservatism that informed the policies of the gallery and museum world of the time. Validation by some existing system was necessary for an artist or a work of art to be exhibited. Whether that was acceptance in Europe or adherence to an accepted style, the result was that there was little room for experimentation within galleries or museums.

Picasso was both a looming presence and major stumbling block for the Americans. Throughout the 1930s, not a year passed without a major Picasso exhibition in New York. John Graham refers to him in 1936 as the "greatest artist of the past, present and future."¹⁴

of a virile native school of painting' that is 'strong enough to carry conviction". Jewell concludes that American artists of some future time may hope to achieve the level of accomplishment of their European betters; but who and when are open questions.

¹¹. Occasionally, other artists such as Karl Knaths, John Graham, Ralph Rosenborg and David Burluk, were invited to exhibit with The Ten, so that the number of artists shown would be as advertised. Still, they were sometimes referred to as "The Ten who are nine."

¹² Gottlieb attributed his break from the group to his exhibition of paintings done in Arizona, which were criticized by some members of The Ten as being "too abstract". A founding member of the group, Gottlieb did not participate in their final exhibition in 1940.

¹³. Mercury Galleries, New York, *The Ten: Whitney Dissenters*, November 5 - 26, 1938.

¹⁴. John D. Graham, *System and Dialectics of Art*, New York, Delphic Studios, 1936.

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In that same year there were no less than four Picasso retrospective exhibitions in New York, and the Museum of Living Art acquired a major painting, *The Three Musicians* of 1921.¹⁵(fig. 1) While he was widely admired by American artists, their respect for Picasso's work did not translate into parody, nor was it undiluted. In a letter written in December, 1934, David Smith reveals one of his aims, which was shared by at least some of his New York colleagues: "I hope to get organized with a viewpoint not subject to the French School and dear old Picasso."¹⁶

At the same time, New York galleries and museums included a broad range of contemporary art in their exhibitions. To continue with the example of 1936, the Museum of Modern Art held a retrospective of John Marin as well as its famous "Cubism and Abstract Art" and "Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism" shows; the Julien Levy Gallery held one-person exhibitions of de Chirico, Dali, and Tchelitchew; and Karl Schmidt-Rotluff, Henri Matisse, Max Ernst, Joan Miró, and many others were presented in major one-person exhibitions at different venues.

Along with the large numbers of modern and contemporary European artists on display in New York, the influence of so-called "primitive" cultures was making itself felt in the arts on several levels.¹⁷ Certainly, there was an awareness of European artists' reliance on African or Oceanic models and motifs, and surrealist artists referred to the art of tribal cultures and that of children, the self-taught (also labeled "primitive"), and the mentally ill as vaguely analogous examples of the uninhibited expression of subconscious material. The "Fantastic Art" show at the Museum of Modern Art essentially formalized that notion, including examples of the art of renaissance and later Europe, a few tribal objects, some works by children, some by self-taught artists, and some by the "insane." The centerpiece of the show, however, was the section of surrealist art. The exhibition as a whole was organized to demonstrate the surrealist concept that the subconscious had always been the root of artistic thought and creativity in Western cultures, and that work created by untutored and uninhibited hands was closer to the source.¹⁸

¹⁵. Gottlieb claimed to have seen *The Three Musicians* when it was first exhibited in Paris, in 1921. Its acquisition and display in New York must have validated his sense of having been involved in European modernism in a more direct way than his peers.

¹⁶. Letter from David Smith to Edgar Levy, December 13, 1934, Archives of American Art.

¹⁷. **The publication of Robert Goldwater's *Primitivism in Modern Painting* (New York: Harper & Brothers) at the end of 1938 may in one sense be viewed as a summary of trends. This formal analysis of the relationships between modern European painters and the work of tribal cultures declares (on p. xxi): "In relation to these [aboriginal or prehistoric] arts as an ideal, the modern painter must necessarily be primitivistic."**

¹⁸. In his introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition, Alfred Barr writes: "Why should the art of the child and the insane be exhibited together with works by mature and normal artists? Actually, nothing could be more appropriate as comparative material in an exhibition of fantastic art, for many children and psychopaths exist, at least part of the time, in a world of their own, unattainable to the rest of us, save in art or in dreams in which the imagination lives an unfettered life." The question never asked, by Barr or the surrealists, is why people with credentials as Curators or artists were needed to select the proper examples of unschooled art.

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The influence of the surrealists on Gottlieb and his peers was, of course, a major one, and not to be discounted. Many of their theories about art-making, especially those about the importance of subconscious material and the methods of reaching it, were critical to the younger Americans. At the same time, other influences and trends were also affecting American artists, not the least of which was a need, as Gottlieb stated, to find their own voices.

In the 1930s, Gottlieb's circle of friends included his Brooklyn neighbors, artists Edgar Levy and Lucille Corcos, David Smith and Dorothy Dehner. Like Adolph and his wife, Esther, these married couples were all young artists, whose situation as immediate neighbors from 1934 to the end of the decade made their relationship especially close. An etching in which each of these artist creates a portrait of the other documents one evening of their friendship in 1933 (fig. 2).¹⁹ Milton Avery was another close friend of Gottlieb's, and would remain one throughout his life, as were John Graham and Mark Rothko. Barnett Newman and his wife Annalee were also part of the Gottlieb's group in those years. Most of these individuals were dedicated and progressive artists. They were aware of developments in Europe, could see examples in museums and galleries, if not reproduced in one of the magazines like *Minotaure* or *Cahiers d'Art* which they regularly obtained. As a group, they must have maintained a dynamic level of discussion, given their level of interest and involvement and their subsequent achievements.

John Graham appears to have played the role of intermediary between the art worlds of Europe and America for the group of artists of which Gottlieb was a part. Not only was he an artist²⁰ who had lived in Paris and still travelled back and forth but he was also an authority on tribal art, serving as advisor to both the Crowninshield and Helena Rubinstein collections. Graham's characteristically lavish estimation of the art of tribal groups is expressed in his book *System and Dialectics of Art*²¹, in which the author proposes abstraction as the highest form of art, and credits prehistoric, African, Greek Archaic and Classic, and some modern artists as representing the highest achievements in abstract art. At least some of Gottlieb's close friends appear to have been involved with tribal arts in the early 1930s through Graham. Letters written by David Smith and Dorothy Dehner, to their and the Gottlieb's mutual friends, Edgar Levy and Lucille Corcos document of the length of time that these Americans were actively interested in primitive works, and the casual mixing

¹⁹. The plate for this etching was created by the artists in 1933, when one proof was run on Gottlieb's press. An edition of 100 was run in 1974, when David Levy found the plate among his mother's belongings. The print is accompanied by a documentation sheet signed by Dorothy Dehner, Esther Gottlieb, Edgar Levy and David Levy.

²⁰. In 1968, Gottlieb remembered a 1929 exhibition of Graham's, "of a series of paintings which he termed at the time 'minimalism.' And I can describe the paintings: they were painted with enamels and every painting was divided in half. The upper half might be white and the lower half might be brown...but the format of the paintings, they were all very much alike...in the catalog it was called an exhibition of minimalism." Hudson interview, p 17.

²¹. Graham, *System and Dialectics of Art*.

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of primitive and contemporary ideas.²² In a letter dated September 6, 1933, Smith relates details of what seems to have been some dealing in African art:

Crowninshield has sent me a few things ... I'm sending tomorrow a M'pongwe XV Century mask - white face of magic clay rather Chinese looking...Graham intends to have a big Negro art show this winter...²³

In 1935, Smith wrote to Levy from Athens, as he observed the excavations around the Parthenon:

I've been reading Pliny & Vitruvius & Theophrastus and learning their methods...one realizes what Jesus rococo shit the Greeks did with colored statues too...those beautiful patinas, the result of age and decay - are half of the value...²⁴

Graham organized the "big Negro art show," a large exhibition of 134 sculptures, at the Seligmann Gallery in January of 1936 (fig. 3). Graham refers to African sculpture in his catalogue essay as "an art resulting from a highly developed aesthetic viewpoint; from logical 'argumentation' and consummate craftsmanship....The art of Africa is classic, in the same sense that the Egyptian, Greek, Chinese and Gothic arts are classic."²⁵

The Museum of Modern Art had displayed its own exhibition of "African Negro Art" curated by James Johnson Sweeney in March, 1935. Sweeney's show consisted of almost 600 objects including sculpture, artifacts and weavings. In his catalogue essay, the curator refers to the qualities of African art as "essential plastic seriousness, moving dramatic qualities, eminent craftsmanship and sensibility to materials, as well as to the relationship of material with form and expression."²⁶

Far from being a cultural backwater in the 1930s, the range of material on display and themes of exhibitions in New York were as sophisticated as those seen today. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., director of the Museum of Modern Art, led the way in exhibiting an array of culturally and thematically diverse works in his institution dedicated to (and known as) "the Modern". In addition to many exhibitions of the works of contemporary European artists and styles, MoMA presented full-scale replicas of prehistoric paintings organized by

²². Edgar Levy and Lucille Corcos lived in an apartment one floor below the Gottlieb's in Brooklyn during part of the 1930s. The Gottlieb's along with Edgar Levy, Lucille Corcos, David Smith and Dorothy Dehner formed a close group of friends during this time. According to Paul Bodin, a friend of Gottlieb's, and Esther Gottlieb, the Levy's door was always open and Gottlieb would stop in to visit regularly.

²³. Letter from David Smith to Edgar Levy, September 6, 1933, Archives of American Art.

²⁴. Letter from David Smith to Edgar Levy, 1935, Archives of American Art.

²⁵. John D. Graham, catalogue essay, "Exhibition of Sculptures of Old African Civilizations." Jacques Seligmann Gallery.

²⁶. James Johnson Sweeney, "The Art of Negro Africa" in *African Negro Art*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, March, 1935).

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anthropologist Leo Froebenius in May of 1937²⁷ (fig. 4). As described in a *New York Times* review, the exhibition, installed on three floors, included "splendid facsimile drawings in color. Some of them are enormous. One rock painting...covers, as reproduced, an entire wall at the museum."²⁸ Another review notes that "Mr. Barr has performed a service by assembling on the fourth floor, for purposes of comparison, some work by Miró, Arp, Klee, Masson, Lebedev, and Larionov, artists of the twentieth century."²⁹ Among the many other shows at the Modern were "Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art" in 1940 and "Indian Art of the United States" in 1941. Both exhibitions displayed objects ranging in age from the prehistoric to the contemporary.

The Museum of Modern Art was not the only institution that served as a resource for a broad range of cultural material. The Brooklyn Museum, within walking distance of Gottlieb's home at the time, and where Gottlieb exhibited some of his work in annual invitational exhibitions, housed large and impressive collections of Native American and Egyptian objects, and somewhat smaller collections of African and Ancient Near Eastern work, as well as its notable collection of American art and European works. In 1939, The Brooklyn Museum organized and displayed a collection of 150 masks "ranging from a Ptolemaic carvartonnage [sic] mask and the...Fayum portrait encaustic...to modern gas masks, a surgical mask...Tibetan monstrosities, Kwakiutl Indian and Aztec masks, work of mound builders, African and other religious ceremonial masks, Oriental theatrical examples and medieval armor are all included, arranged in groups with admirably terse accompanying descriptive matter."³⁰ (fig 5) In 1941 the Metropolitan Museum of Art put on an exhibition of art from Australia, which included aboriginal work along with paintings of nineteenth and twentieth century artists of European ancestry.

In addition to this activity in the most popular art galleries and museums, New York was home to various other sources which Gottlieb and some of his colleagues used regularly. On permanent display at the American Museum of Natural History, for example, were holdings of art and artifacts of Native America (especially comprehensive was the collection of Northwest Coast tribes) (fig 6), Mexico and Central America, Africa, and to a lesser degree the Near East. The museum regularly published materials and held lectures on these cultures.³¹ (fig 7) In essence, New York in the 1930s was a perfect breeding ground for a generation of dedicated young artists.

²⁷. *Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa*, The Museum of Modern Art.

²⁸. Edward Alden Jewell, "The Cave Man As Artist," *The New York Times*, May 2, 1937, Section 11, p.9.

²⁹. Edward Alden Jewell, "Art Museum Opens Prehistoric Show", *The New York Times*, April 28, 1937, p.21.

³⁰. Devree, Howard, "Display of Masks Seen In Brooklyn," *The New York Times*, October 25, 1939, p. 20.

³¹. Among the remaining works in Gottlieb's library are two of these monographs: *Indians of the Northwest Coast*, by Pliny Earle Goddard, published in 1934; and *Artists and Craftsmen of Ancient Central America* by George C. Vaillant, published in 1935. Both books contain sections on the social and religious life of these peoples, and each contains many illustrations of works of art. That Gottlieb owned and retained these early editions is further documentation of his interest in non-Western cultures.

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Gottlieb and his colleagues certainly participated in and discussed all this activity. One distinction between Gottlieb and the others in his group was the fact that he had been to Europe on his own as a teenager and had travelled widely and experienced European collections of traditional, ancient, and tribal arts to a greater degree than any except Graham. As a result of his experiences, Gottlieb's interests were more defined than those of his colleagues. This made him something of a senior figure in the group.

Gottlieb exhibited with "The Ten" in the mid to late 1930s, showing expressionist realist paintings along with his friends Milton Avery and Mark Rothko. It was a period and a style that Gottlieb later called a false start.³² More important perhaps than his painting at this period were his routine visits to the galleries and museums, and his discussions of contemporary issues with his artist colleagues. He also maintained an involvement in a literary discussion group whose members included Barnett Newman and Gottlieb's cousin, the poet Cecil Hemley. Gottlieb's interest in literary ideas was demonstrated earlier, in paintings of the late 1920s based on T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland," and he maintained an interest in such writers as Eliot, Joyce, and Pound.

In the fall of 1937, the Gottliebs moved to Tucson, Arizona, for Esther Gottlieb's health. It was the first time Gottlieb, as an adult, lived outside New York and the pressures of trying to exist as an artist and keep up with the rapidly changing trends for a prolonged period. Mary MacNaughton notes his feelings of isolation and ultimately the independence and freedom this gave him.³³ These feelings are borne out by the letters Gottlieb wrote to his friend Paul Bodin in New York. They reveal both Gottlieb's disenchantment with the New York scene and his ability to value works of art from different cultures as equal to those of European heritage. Gottlieb wrote on March 3, 1938

We get the Sunday Times every Wednesday and judging from the reproductions, not to speak of Jewell's articles, which reach an all-time high for imbecility, we don't seem to be missing much. From what I gather is going on (aside from Cezanne and Picasso now and then) I wouldn't swap all the shows of a month in N.Y. for a visit to the State Museum here which has a marvellous collection of Indian things.³⁴ (fig 8)

and again on April 23, 1938

Thanks a lot for the clippings...In general the reviews seem disappointing at least the ones we have seen. I don't know how Milton [Avery] feels - to me it is discouraging. Only the slick painters get the gravy.³⁵

³². Adolph Gottlieb, interview by Dorothy Seckler, October 25, 1967.

³³. MacNaughton, Mary Davis, in *Adolph Gottlieb: A Retrospective*.

³⁴. Letter from Adolph Gottlieb to Paul Bodin, March 3, 1938; Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation.

³⁵. Letter from Adolph Gottlieb to Paul Bodin, April 23, 1938; Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation.

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That Gottlieb was reassessing his personal approach to painting at a time when the art most easily accessible to him was that of Native American groups was important to the conceptual development of the Pictographs.

By the time he returned to New York in the fall of 1938, Gottlieb's work had changed radically. He had returned to the elements which had first attracted him to painting, the flat planes and subdued harmonies that he admired in the works of Cézanne and Braque. Some of the Arizona paintings were exhibited in New York in 1939 and were criticized by the members of The Ten for being too abstract. This was a period of intense self-examination for Gottlieb, one of a series of such periods which were characteristic of this artist as he reached a turning point. Gottlieb examined all the facets of painting which seemed to him to be of importance. Beginning with the Arizona still lifes, which predict concerns that manifested themselves as "Imaginary Landscapes" in the 1950s, Gottlieb experimented first with abstraction, and then with an American type of surrealism reminiscent of artists like Peter Blume or O. Louis Guglielmi, but didn't produce many paintings in either approach.³⁶ In 1940 and early 1941, Gottlieb produced wholly abstract paintings which were formal precedents for the Pictographs. These paintings reflect in part Gottlieb's attempts to synthesize major concerns, in this case, biomorphism and abstraction. The Pictographs themselves reflect what MacNaughton has called a "wedding of Abstraction and Surrealism."³⁷ The seeds of such integration, however, were inherent in the cultural atmosphere of New York and foretold by events of the late 1930s.

The fears engendered by the destructiveness of modern warfare underlie much of the culture of this century. The destruction wrought by World War I shocked Europe, while the United States was spared most of its horrors. One of the primary reactions in this country was isolationism, which remained a powerful political force until, and for some time after, the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. The danger of widespread conflict in Europe became manifest again in 1936 with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. The news media and politicians throughout Europe and the U.S. tried to avoid the issue of a threatening militant facism by downplaying this conflict. However, many idealistic people from several Western countries volunteered and fought for the Spanish Republic.

Gottlieb and many of his peers were associated with the progressive American Artist's Congress through the 1930s. An art world that had formed its politics around the imminent crises caused by the Great Depression was forced to attention in 1937 with the exhibition, at the Spanish pavillion of the Paris International Exposition, of Picasso's *Guernica* (fig 9); a painting that confronts the horror and brutality of modern war. Immediately, the exhibition of this painting became the subject of battles among artists, dealers, collectors, and critics. The questions raised serve to point out the revolutionary nature of this painting, and the divided thinking within art communities on both sides of the

³⁶. At present, **the Gottlieb Foundation has identified** six paintings stylistically related to American surrealism; five were painted in 1939-1940 and one (*Box and Sea Objects*, Guggenheim Museum) was painted about 1942. Considering that Gottlieb's output was about 35 to 40 paintings per year, these few works should not be given undue importance.

³⁷. MacNaughton, Mary Davis, p. 29.

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Atlantic. The debate continued for the next several years, at each new exhibition venue.³⁸ Among those Americans who found fault was E. A. Jewell, chief critic of *The New York Times*. Indicative of Jewell's feelings were statements made in a November, 1939 review of the Museum of Modern Art's 40 year retrospective exhibition of Picasso:

Somewhat the same apparently confused and desperate mood of palingenesis might account also for the shockingly trivial, enormous *Guernica*. Its only merit, so far as I can see, resides in a certain rather elementary structural form. As a social tract the grotesque *Guernica* might well, I should think, be looked upon as libelous.³⁹

Alfred H. Barr, Jr., writing of the painting in 1946, included examples of the criticisms levelled at this painting and ends his discussion with a brief and direct challenge to the critics to "point out another painting of the decade, indeed, the century, that is as good"⁴⁰. Clement Greenberg, in a 1957 essay on Picasso, finds negative values in the painting based solely on its refusal to rely on the principles of abstraction, as he defined those principles. This sort of comment may serve as an indication of the beliefs of the American Abstract Artists group to whose members and beliefs Greenberg had closely allied himself in the 1930s. Gottlieb, Rothko, Smith, Graham, Newman, and others, however, formed an opposition to the idea of *pure* art and were dedicated to painting that was directly connected to human experience.

Gottlieb must have perceived *Guernica* as a whole, unlike the many published critics or supporters who concentrated on style or theme. In its entirety, as Gottlieb would have viewed the painting, its revolutionary nature is enhanced. Notwithstanding the attacks on modern society by the surrealists and the dadaists who preceded them, *Guernica* is the first major modern painting to confront the human tragedy that was occurring at the moment.⁴¹ The strategic location of the painting, done as a commission to the Spanish Pavillion at the

³⁸. The events surrounding the creation and exhibitions of *Guernica* are described in detail in Herschel B. Chipp's book on the painting (*Picasso's Guernica*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1988). Following the painting's exhibition at the World's Fair, the contributors of *Cahiers d'Art* published a special double issue in the summer of 1937, reproducing the painting and sketches, as well as photos of the work in progress. Essays were written, according to Chipp, "on the painting, on Picasso, on his Spanish characteristics, on Franco, on Goya and El Greco, and they wrote several poetic evocations of the themes in *Guernica*." Among the essays, Chipp quotes Michel Leiris, "Picasso sends us our letter of doom: all that we love is going to die, and that is why it is necessary that we gather up all that we love, like the emotion of great farewells, in something of unforgettable beauty."

³⁹. Jewell, E.A., "Stature of Modern Art's Proteus", *The New York Times*, Nov 19, 1939, section 9, p1. Writing as favorably as he could, in another *New York Times* article of May 11, 1939 calling attention to the exhibition of the painting in New York in order to raise funds for the Spanish Refugee Relief Campaign, Jewell notes that "the peculiar idiom used gets between the artist and his theme...".

⁴⁰. Barr, Alfred H, *Picasso - Fifty Years of his Art*, 1946, New York: The Museum of Modern Art (p.202)

⁴¹. *Guernica* was painted in May and June of 1937, the bombing of the Basque city took place in April of that year.

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Paris International Exposition which opened in July, 1937, left no doubt about the artist's intention. Picasso's painting, his choice of subject, demanded a formal scheme different from his then-current work. The use of cubist alignments and distortions of form, in conjunction with a localized, literal organization created a synthesis unlike any previously seen (it is this strategy that Greenberg criticizes). Its purpose was manifestly communicative, therefore in opposition to theories of pure abstraction, and certainly a jolt to those who valued this artist as the master of abstract painting. This one indisputably political painting combined so-called styles in order to succeed in its communication. The very basis of this intent, the idea of communicating to a large audience about a current political struggle, was an assault on the dominant modes of avant-garde practice. At the same time, Picasso did not dilute his language to promote his message. Instead, he drew from previous work, and *Guernica* is built of the radical but necessary distortions which convey the horrors of a historical moment without pandering to reactionary tastes.

It is clear that New York artists were aware of the painting and the controversies that swirled around it. *The Art Digest*, a popular art magazine of the time, devoted several pages of many issues to the ongoing *Guernica* controversies, reporting opinions at each new exhibition venue. Most of the major daily newspapers in New York devoted large amounts of space and featured numerous reproductions of Picasso's work. Given the time frame of the exhibitions of *Guernica*,⁴² the painting becomes a major image in the reportage on the advance of German and Italian facism in Europe and Africa leading to World War II.

Surely, Gottlieb would have been aware of the singular importance of this painting by an artist he admired⁴³. Both the emotional/societal synthesis of Picasso's message, and the formal uses of cubist space and distortions to promote communication on an emotional level were adapted into the Pictographs. In a work that is as much a tribute to another painter as Gottlieb ever attempted, the 1945 painting *Expectation of Evil* (cat. #21) emulates Picasso's palette and utilizes fragments of *Guernica*'s figures. The Gottlieb painting, however, is informed by the brutality revealed at the end of World War II.

The second major event, which produced radical realignments and helped shape direction among New York artists in the late 1930s, was an ongoing debate published in letters and occasional articles in *The New York Times* between 1938 and 1941, on the nature of American art. The debate was brought on by two simultaneous events: an

⁴². After the Paris World's Fair closed in November, 1937, *Guernica* was included in an exhibition of four French artists (Matisse, Braque, Laurens and Picasso), that toured Norway, Denmark and Sweden from January through April, 1938. It was next exhibited in London, promoted for its political theme, in October, 1938, and then, in Manchester in February, 1939. In May of 1939, *Guernica* was exhibited in New York, hosted by the American Artists Congress, while Gottlieb was still a member.

⁴³. Aside from the many notices, stories and reviews in the press and the special issue of *Cahiers d'Art*, Gottlieb would most likely have been aware of a telephone message Picasso relayed to the American Artists Congress in December, 1937. Picasso's message was:

It is my wish at this time to remind you that I have always believed, and still believe, that artists who live and work with spiritual values cannot and should not remain indifferent to a conflict in which the highest values of humanity and civilization are at stake.

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exhibition of "American Art", which the Museum of Modern Art had organized and was being shown in Paris and London before returning to the U.S. and the 1939 World's Fair. The American Art show featured mostly regionalist and social realist painting as examples of contemporary American art. Artists working in other styles must have wondered if they were not American enough, or if American art was not modern enough. Reviews from Paris and London confirmed the worst stereotypes about American artists as naive, provincial, and second-rate.⁴⁴

The World's Fair provoked controversy almost from the moment plans were announced for a New York site. Immediately a public battle was joined, the thrust of which was that the Fair's organizers had made no attempt to present American art. This struggle ultimately produced a major building dedicated to the exhibition of American painting and sculpture, which was to be selected through a series of committees located throughout the country. The selection committees were directed to assemble the most equitable and broad representation of American art, while remaining neutral to such issues as modernism, abstraction, social realism, precisionism or any stylistic or conceptual approach. Naturally, the idea of such selection committees, their individual members, ideologies, and choices continued to be points of public and often raucous debate from the time the plan was announced through the end of the Fair.⁴⁵ The arguments that ensued, featured regularly in newspapers and art magazines, illustrate the chaotic and searching nature of the visual arts in America at the end of the decade. Essentially, these debates addressed the question "what is American about American art?"

The importance of the World's Fair exhibition was clear enough to the American art community. For the first time American artists would be exhibiting on an equal basis with their European counterparts, and with some certified "masterpieces" of Western art, at a major American venue. As the Fair exhibition became a reality, it produced a temporary but important change in the position of galleries and museums in New York. Since the controversy had become public, institutions large and small stayed open for the summer of 1939 and arranged major exhibitions in which each registered its own opinions on the issue of which styles are valid and which are not. The progressive Museum of Modern Art, in its show "Art of Our Time," which was both a World's Fair show and a tenth anniversary

⁴⁴. Among the many responses to the Parisian critics, which *The Times* reprinted, was the following which appeared on August 21, 1938:

My impatience has had very little to do with the imposed question of whether there is or is not an "American art", but practically everything to do with the assurance of the French critics who state that there is not.

Why do they think they'd know? What reason is there to assume that the breed of French critics in general has improved and that the current ones are to be taken any more seriously than we now take their predecessors who ignored or castigated Daumier, Manet, Cézanne?

⁴⁵. Original planning would have left selections to a single panel of "experts." Large-scale and vocal opposition on the part of artists' organizations, most notable The American Artists Congress, resulted in a national series of regional competitions, in which an independent panel in each region would be charged with selection of a representative group of paintings and sculptures that would be sent to New York to be exhibited in the World's Fair pavillion. These plans were developed in 1937. From the time they were announced until the time the Fair closed in 1940, and for some time after, the idea of selection was publicly and vehemently criticised and defended from all possible sectors of the art community in the U.S.

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exhibition that initiated its new galleries on West 53rd Street, again relegated American artists to a secondary status in its view of the modern. Only a handful of American artists were included among the more than two hundred artists in this important exhibition; and those Americans who did make the show, with the notable exception of Stuart Davis, were either self-taught, regionalists, social-realists, surrealists, or of an earlier generation like John Sloan, Charles Burchfield, and Georgia O'Keefe.

For Gottlieb and his colleagues, the events of the end of the decade made each question his or her position relative to European art and to the various schools of American art. In Gottlieb's case, the process began in Arizona in 1937 and continued in discussions with Mark Rothko, which lasted into the early 1940s. The art Gottlieb valued crossed every boundary. It originated in contemporary Europe and Mexico, or sixteenth-century Africa, or the Ancient Near East. His instincts forced him to an isolated position, since he could not accept the validity of any of the academies of the time. He valued the human, emotionally moving capacity of visual art, but that was a quality he and Rothko found lacking in the art of this period.

These two Americans took up, in their own fashion, the discussions begun in the press, and determined to fashion a vital American art of international and universal meaning. They found the key to their aims in a search for "subject matter." As Gottlieb related the story,

I think I managed to persuade Rothko that he had been painting a series of people standing on subway platforms, and I felt this was too close to the notion of the kind of genre painting of the American scene and so on. I had done things myself, perhaps not of people standing on subway platforms, but of a baseball game or a handball game, subjects of that nature....I felt that this was a mistake, and if we were going to find some way of striking out and doing something, the first thing that would have to be done would be to reject this kind of subject matter, this whole approach to painting. So I suggested that let's start with eliminating any subject matter of that sort - let's try classical subject matter and see what we can do with it...It was the practical necessity of first of all getting away completely from the whole cultural atmosphere which we were immersed and breaking through that.⁴⁶

Gottlieb seized on the Oedipus myth because of its multiple associations. Oedipus is a classical theme, a traditional subject for European artists of many periods, not the least of them being the surrealists. In that respect, Oedipus is important for its Freudian association, and that connection, typical of Gottlieb's humor, is another important link - for just as Oedipus is the quintessential dilemma of separation, it is Gottlieb's declaration of independence from his surrealist contemporaries. As the Pictographs developed, each image was selected for its potential to carry several meanings, and to combine with other images on a single surface in many ways, thereby creating added levels of meaning and potential meaning. The processes involved may begin with the automatic writing of surrealism, but they lead directly to the interplay of layers of personal and universal meaning which characterize later abstract expressionism.

⁴⁶. Friedman interview, tape 1A, p.9.

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II. THE IDEA OF MYTH AND THE PAINTING AS OBJECT

By 1941 I had discarded all the things that might have won me a prize...In fact, I couldn't even get a show because it just looked as if I didn't know how to paint ...In 1941, the thing as far as I was concerned started with some conversations I had with Rothko in which I said I think one of the ways to solve this problem that confronts us is to find some sort of subject matter other than that which is around us...I said, how about some classical subject matter like mythological themes? And...we agreed to do that, and Mark chose themes from the plays of Aeschylus and I tried, played with the Oedipus myth, which was both a classical theme and a Freudian theme. And, as a result, we very quickly discovered that by a shift in subject matter we were getting into formal problems that we hadn't anticipated. Because obviously we weren't going to try to illustrate these themes in some sort of Renaissance style. We were exploring. So, suddenly we found there were formal problems that confronted us for which there was no precedent, and we were in an unknown territory.⁴⁷

Among the most widely discussed elements in Gottlieb's Pictographs is his use of elements of classical mythology. The references to specific myths in titles, and the allusions to and images relating to several key elements of mythology serve to inform and direct the paintings through the context Gottlieb called "subject matter". Understanding what he meant by this phrase involves some degree of translation as the paintings are not *about* myth. The references to mythology are an integral element of these paintings and serve various functions as the paintings evolve. However, it is important to understand Gottlieb's process in developing the form for, as he said of himself, he was a conceptual painter. He explained his thinking in a 1962 interview with Martin Friedman:

It started with the myth, and at the time I was interested in the idea of myth, and perhaps I should explain why I was interested in myth. The interest in myth was in the air; there were a lot of poets and literary people were concerned with myth and I felt it might be possible to do something with mythological subject matter apropos to the kind of subject matter that was prevalent at the time. There was the usual scene painting and the Americana type of subject matter.

I had an idea that in order to arrive at a style and to develop painting ideas which would not follow the pattern of Surrealism, a purist kind of abstract painting or the Americana type of painting, it would be necessary to have an entirely different subject matter; and therefore, using the myth, the idea of myth as subject matter, really a form of sort of a groping for subject matter which would be personal and could be integrated with some notion of style and painting ideas.

And I felt that any art in which style is highly developed always had a concept in which the style and the subject matter and the means that

⁴⁷. Interview with Andrew Hudson, May, 1968, verbatim transcript, pp. 4 - 5.

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were employed were all tied together; and you couldn't just indiscriminately apply a style of painting to any subject matter.⁴⁸

Gottlieb's orientation, his own understanding of the values of art, centers around a particular concept of the art object. It is a concept that owes a great deal to John Graham and to the African sculptures that Gottlieb admired and collected in terms of its regard for an integrated object which would ideally become the manifestation of the concepts it was intended to convey. At the same time, the concepts that Gottlieb valued and sought to convey owe a debt to the exhibition policies of institutions like the Museum of Modern Art, which repeatedly exhibited African, American Indian, "Primitive",⁴⁹ and other non-traditional types of art under the banner of modernity. Gottlieb's resolution of this issue is in the formal presentation of the Pictographs. In these paintings, which produced in Gottlieb the feeling that he no longer "knew how to paint," European ideas about painting are supplanted with those of tribal cultures. The painting is not a picture window onto reality, a vision of the subconscious, a statement of purist philosophy, or a view of the landscape. It is, instead, an object meant to be interpreted by the viewer, and to affect the viewer at a primal, emotional level.⁵⁰ Beginning with the Pictographs, painting has adapted a non-Western form. It has become a repository for a mixture of cultural, sociological, and personal themes -- a mythic object for a modern society.

This concept is a radical departure from European notions of picture-making,⁵¹ and led ultimately to one of the foundations of abstract expressionism and much of the painting that followed. The integrated painting/object is the formal dimension of the Pictographs. The critical difference between these paintings and their immediate predecessors, and the break with European tradition and modernism lies in this distinction. European painting, even that most contemporary type of the late 1930s, the abstract-surrealist picture, was just that -- a picture. The terms used to describe and the means used to convey information are organized around an idea of depiction or display. Communication is effected through the

⁴⁸. Adolph Gottlieb, unpublished interview with Martin Friedman, August, 1962. On file at the Adolph & Esther Gottlieb Foundation.

⁴⁹. The term "primitive" in this instance refers to Western artists with no formal schooling, such as Rousseau, Morris Hirshfield, John Kane, and others who enjoyed a certain popularity in the 1940s.

⁵⁰. **In the notes to the June, 1943 letter by Rothko and Gottlieb, published in *The New York Times*, is the following statement, which is omitted in the final version:**

A picture is not its color, its form, or its anecdote, but an intent entity idea whose implications transcend any of these parts.

(cited in "Shared Myths: Reconsideration of Rothko's and Gottlieb's Letter to *The New York Times*" by Bonnie Clearwater, *Archives of American Art Journal*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1984, p. 25)

⁵¹. The closest European precedents I can think of are the works of several German Expressionist painters, which Gottlieb would probably have seen in his travels in Europe in the early 1920s. The German painters share an emphasis on the personal and emotional, and they, too, saw affinities in tribal arts, especially in African sculpture. However, the German artists, for the most part, retained the idea of the picture. Even Kandinsky and Klee, two of the most abstract of these painters, retained a semblance of depth or illusionism in their work. The Pictographs reject these devices completely.

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artist's act of laying down symbols, be they words, pictures, diagrams, or abstract shapes on a plane within a delimited set of boundaries. The viewer approaches these messages passively, after the fact of their inscription, and interprets them on the basis of culturally acquired knowledge. Paintings, in the traditional sense, are meant to be "read." Even the most radical of the surrealists, artists like Masson or Miro (fig 10) who worked in an abstract vein, were dealing in what they termed "automatic writing". This form, as it was used in Europe and in America by such artists as Robert Motherwell and, initially, Jackson Pollock, did not seek to differ from the basic, narrative construct of writing.

Gottlieb's Pictographs rebel against this notion of visual art as writing. They posit an active role on the part of the viewer. They do not depend on the viewer's cultural training or acumen for interpretation. Gottlieb consistently held that these paintings were not meant to be "read," and they have been most maligned by those oriented in Western tradition who therefore insist on forcing readings on them. To interpret a Pictograph in one fashion is certainly valid, but the inherent strength of these paintings is that they will continually redefine themselves to different viewers, or even the same viewer over time. As Gottlieb valued the role of artist as "image maker," he created and combined images that would continue to re-make themselves.

This integrative concept remains so radical, even now, that many critics and historians write in terms of attempting to interpret the "symbols" of the Pictographs, attempting to interpret the psychology of the artist, or of finding the antecedents of the formal evolution of these paintings, or attempting to use various strategies of reading the paintings in a traditional Western sense as depictions, albeit mysterious and symbolic ones. The major importance of Gottlieb's concept (considering the relatively high visibility of Gottlieb's paintings during the early 1940s) is that it allows the departures from European styles of his colleagues such as Pollock, Rothko, Newman, and others, all of whom speak of their later work in terms strikingly similar to those used by Gottlieb in reference to the concepts on which the Pictographs were based.⁵² The shift in emphasis from a field used for depiction, no matter how abstract the depiction, to an integrated object, no matter how flat or what vestigial remnants of the depictive tradition persist, is the leap of faith which

⁵². "Subject matter," and its importance in abstract painting, is the most common usage, **and virtually every artist associated with the New York School uses the term as the defining element of his work at one point or another. It was Gottlieb and Rothko, in their 1943 letter to *The New York Times* (see p.) who asserted that "the subject matter is crucial..." In that same letter, Gottlieb and Rothko assert "It is our function as artists to make the spectator see the world our way, not his way." This sentiment was echoed in a 1951 statement by Willem de Kooning, who insisted "I force my attitude upon this world, and I have this right...." (in *Modern Artists in America*, Robert Goodnough, ed. New York: Wittenborn, Schulz, 1951, p. 15). Another of Gottlieb's better-known statements, "Different times require different images....our obsessive, subterranean and pictographic images are the expression of the neurosis which is our reality. To my mind, certain so-called abstraction is not abstraction at all. On the contrary, it is the reality of our time." was published in *The Tiger's Eye* in 1947 ("Ides of Art", *The Tiger's Eye*, vol I, no. 2, December, 1947, p. 43). In a 1950 interview, Jackson Pollock makes a similar statement, "My opinion is that new needs need new techniques. And modern artists have found new ways and new means of making their statements. It seems to me that the modern painter cannot express this age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in the old forms of the Renaissance or of any other past culture. Each age finds its own technique." (from *Jackson Pollock*, by Francis V. O'Conner, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1967, p 79)**

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determines the difference between European and American avant-garde painting of the period. It begins in America with Gottlieb's Pictographs of 1941.

The choice of myth as subject matter had several motives. Of course, there was the example of the surrealist concentration on mythology and its association with the Freudian concepts to be found in the Oedipus myth. Yet, as Gottlieb stated, his interest in Oedipus was owing to the myth's being both a classical and a Freudian theme. The particular way in which Gottlieb introduced mythological subject was a rejection of the dominance of surrealism, at the same time that it declared the American artist's sophistication in relation to his European contemporaries. The Pictographs utilize basic themes of certain myths as a means to link with classical Western themes, and via that linkage, to connect with the emotional foundation of world art. It is, in effect, a Jungian interpretation of Freud. For Gottlieb, and his colleague Rothko, the themes of classical mythology linked all the major periods of Western art.

Gottlieb was familiar with Jung's theories of universal and archetypal images, and the images he set down can be easily identified within a Jungian system. It is less certain that the Jungian images Gottlieb used are related to mythology in the ways that system would assume. That is, Gottlieb was not a doctrinaire Jungian, nor was he undergoing formal or self-analysis, and he did not pretend to be. He probably felt that Jung's theories provided further validation of his own. This eclectic view, which may owe something to John Graham, can account for his inclusion of Freudian ideas as equivalents to Jung's, and thus not having to choose one over the other. If asked to explain this apparent dichotomy, Gottlieb would probably say that it was not his business as he was not a psychiatrist but a painter.

Emphasizing the theme of rejection, Gottlieb selected the myth of Oedipus as the beginning of his development of an American art. That tale, a classic of Freudian allusions, relates precisely the concepts Gottlieb wishes to express. Beginning with the surrealist appropriations of Freud, Gottlieb chooses the Freudian centerpiece of rejection of the father; that is, Gottlieb's choice of Oedipus reflects both his awareness of surrealist dominance and his need to break with that system. Similarly, the Oedipus myth is concerned with seeing and blindness, with the centrality of perception, as symbolized by vision. What better theme, then, for an artist whose belief in painting as a purely visual means of communication was central to his efforts. At the same time, the polar opposites of vision and blindness are a prophetic start for an artist whose life's work would center around the irreconcilable conflicts within the human personality and the tensions inherent in their constantly shifting attempts at balance.

Gottlieb's means of using Oedipus concentrates on the image of the eye, seeing and blinded. Despite many statements about brutality and sexuality, it is interesting to note that the incest theme of Oedipus is nowhere referred to in the imagery chosen. In fact, in the seven paintings which refer to Oedipus in the title, the imagery is almost exclusively the stylized eye. As the artist said

[What] I wanted to do with the Oedipus myth, and the main thing that kept sticking in my mind was Oedipus' blinding himself, so I painted paintings with lots of eyes and these eyes were scattered around in compartments. Well, then the thing that became important was not

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Oedipus, not the Oedipus myth, and in this way I developed my own subject matter.⁵³

In the entire body of Pictographs, the image of the eye is used most often. Its use in the Oedipus paintings is clear enough, but the image appears as often in works like *Palace* (cat. #9), *Omen for a Hunter* (cat #42) or *The Enchanted Ones* (cat #17). Gottlieb may have intended different meanings for each usage, but it seems more likely that he found some resonating significance in this image. The example of the eye image provides a clue to Gottlieb's method in the Pictographs.

As Evan Maurer points out in his essay in this catalogue, the eye image is distinctly stylized. Maurer suggests its origins in Egyptian hieroglyphics, many good examples of which Gottlieb would have seen in various museums in New York. Yet, my sense is that the particular eye image Gottlieb referred to is that used by Attic painters of the classical period. Especially persuasive, given the Pictographs early association with Greek mythology, is the type of work known as an "eye cup" (fig 11), of which there were several good examples on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the 1930s. Other attributes shared in common by Attic vases and the earliest Pictographs are color, surface, and a hieratic arrangement of images on the surface. These elements are also shared by Native American pottery of the Southwest, and, to a lesser extent, by major examples of the art of ancient Egypt, and pre-Columbian stelae and murals (examples of which were on permanent display at the American Museum of Natural History since the turn of the century).⁵⁴

Still, the eye image, like the other potent images of the Pictographs, cannot be specifically assigned (the ancient Egyptian image was a model for the Greek). That very notion fit in neatly with Gottlieb's aims. He preferred imagery that he could not definitively interpret.⁵⁵ The images he used were common to various cultures and periods. The eye, for

⁵³. Friedman interview, tape 1A, p. 9.

⁵⁴. **Several authors have pointed to the works of Northwest Coast tribes as a definitive influence on Gottlieb's development of the Pictographs, citing the fact that Gottlieb had a Chilkat blanket in his collection in the 1940s. Gottlieb did purchase the blanket (fig #); however he did so in 1942, after a review of an early Pictograph exhibition drew the analogy between Gottlieb's paintings and Chilkat weavings. As indicated in this essay, Gottlieb was familiar with Northwest Coast works from displays and lectures at the American Museum of Natural History. However, the color and surface of these weavings, and the placement of images into an unyieldingly rigid grid, are formally quite different from Gottlieb's paintings. The color and surfaces of Attic, Southwestern Native American, and pre-Columbian ceramics are much closer in appearance to the Pictographs, and the placement of images, while determined by a grid structure, involve hand drawn divisions and allow some interplay among images - elements that closely resemble Gottlieb's paintings. It is also important to keep in mind Gottlieb's insistence that his references were broader than any one style or type of work. For instance, he often cited Italian trecento and quattrocento painting as a source of the formal structure of the Pictographs. It is interesting, in this context, to consider a painting like Cimabue's *Virgin and Angels*, one of the major paintings at the Louvre which Gottlieb frequented daily for several months in 1921, in relation to the organization of the earliest Pictographs, such as *Oedipus* (cat. #) and *Eyes of Oedipus* (cat. #).**

⁵⁵. As Lawrence Alloway points out in his 1968 essay "Melpomene and Grafitti," which has been reprinted in this catalogue.

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example, is not only a focus of Egyptian and Greek art, but is also a prominent feature of many African tribal works, Native American art (especially that of Northwest Coast peoples), Oceanic art, and to the surrealists for its primal associations.⁵⁶

In 1947 Gottlieb commented that "The role of the artist has always been that of image maker. Different times require different images."⁵⁷ His use of images reinforced his notion that the subject matter of a painting dictated its style⁵⁸. In the case of the early Pictographs, references to myth as depicted by painters of other periods lent authenticity to Gottlieb's theory of images that retain importance through time and cultures. In other words, by drawing an eye image that approximated a type familiar to classical Greece, ancient Egypt, and other ancient and modern cultures, Gottlieb intentionally drew parallels between those societies, reinforcing his belief that some images hold power and importance in and of themselves. At the same time, his use of archaic objects as models for modern paintings allowed Gottlieb to free himself from the formal conventions of European painting. The closely related images and colors of Attic vases Gottlieb would have seen at the Metropolitan Museum and the Native American pottery he remembered from Arizona and could see at the Brooklyn Museum, and their combined associations to thirteenth Century and modern European art reinforced his idea. In forging a type of modern painting which was itself an object with the purpose of conveying images, Gottlieb found a way to present images that resonate with meaning across lines of culture and history, and that center on the individual, whether artist or viewer.

The cultural atmosphere of New York in the 1930s was the breeding ground for the ideas of Adolph Gottlieb and virtually all the artists known subsequently as abstract expressionists. These individuals came from different backgrounds and different artistic and intellectual orientations, but they shared the experiences of the collections, exhibitions, and press of New York. Not all participated in, but none could dismiss, the controversies that swirled around the the W.P.A., the World's Fair, or *Guernica*, and none could fail to be shaped by the democratic "we're all in this together" spirit promoted by politicians and in films, theater, and literature throughout the Great Depression. It was this singular combination of events, along with Europe's descent into fascism and World War II, that created the atmosphere for American artists to develop independently.

The Pictographs, among the earliest examples of formally developed work by this generation of Americans, uniquely combine European and non-European images and ideas. Lawrence Alloway's recollection that Gottlieb stood among his paintings "like the Colossus of Rhodes astride the harbor, and realized that the Pictographs represented a

⁵⁶. The image is prominent in the paintings of René Magritte and in a different way in the work of Andre Masson. There is also the striking usage in the Dali/Buñuel film *Un Chien Andalou*.

⁵⁷. "The Tiger's Eye", #2, December, 1947.

⁵⁸. "I had an idea that in order to arrive at a style and to develop painting ideas which would not follow the pattern of surrealism, a purist kind of abstract painting or the Americana type of painting, it would be necessary to have an entirely different subject matter...I felt that any art in which style is highly developed always had a concept in which the style and the subject matter and the means that were employed were all tied together; and you couldn't just indiscriminately apply a style of painting to any subject matter." Friedman interview, tape 1A, pp. 7 - 8.

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storehouse of culture"⁵⁹ was exactly right. This American artist, propelled by his sense of the complexity of human affairs, his knowledge and acceptance of many forms of visual art, and his personal ambition, translated personal experience into a universalized art form. The process of the Pictographs, Gottlieb's adaptation of automatic writing, allowed him to draw on his knowledge to develop a unique body of work which earned him a place of respect among his contemporaries. The wealth of material available to Gottlieb and the open intellectual spirit of Depression-era New York, played a major role in the development of these intricate paintings.

Gottlieb's Pictographs, along with art created in the early 1940s by his colleagues Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, David Smith, and Clyfford Still, are the predecessors of the later forms of abstract expressionism. The formal and conceptual ground that Gottlieb broke -- the centrality of the individual, the importance of the viewer as active participant, the fusion of meaning and abstraction, the painting as object rather than depiction, the reliance on visual presentation rather than narrative or symbolic language to convey emotional meaning -- are fundamental to the later phase of abstract expressionist painting. It is true that other artists were working on aspects of these ideas around the same time as Gottlieb, but it was Gottlieb who first produced fully developed paintings that diverged from European models.⁶⁰ The Pictographs of Adolph Gottlieb could be seen on

⁵⁹. Alloway, Lawrence, "Adolph Gottlieb and Abstract Painting" in *Adolph Gottlieb: A Retrospective*, New York: The Arts Publisher and Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, 1981, p. 55.

⁶⁰. **Gottlieb worked closely with his friend Mark Rothko at developing this new phase of American art. According to several statements by Gottlieb, corroborated by statements of Esther Gottlieb and Paul Bodin, Gottlieb and Rothko were involved in discussions about changing the nature and direction of American art from about the time of Gottlieb's return from Arizona in the fall of 1938 to the time the first Pictographs (and, presumably, Rothko's first "Mythic" paintings) were painted in 1941. This raises a question as to the dating of two Rothko paintings as listed in the catalogue *Mark Rothko, 1903-1970 - A Retrospective*, with text by Diane Waldman. That catalogue dates the paintings, *Antigone* (cat. # 23) and *Untitled* (cat. # 24), as 1938 and 1939-40 respectively. If this dating is accurate, there is an obvious discrepancy between Gottlieb's version of events and that implied by the creation of these two paintings about two or three years earlier than Gottlieb's Pictographs and the balance of Rothko's Mythic paintings.**

The question is complicated by parts of Waldman's text. On page 34 of the catalogue, there is a quote from Rothko's first wife, Edith Carson, who states: "His work changed dramatically in the early 40's. He and a group of painters were much concerned about subject matter and these people met at our homes. These meetings involved philosophical discussion...there were about four or five artists -- Gottlieb, Newman, Bolotowsky and Tschacbasov." Carson's statement basically confirms Gottlieb's version. Waldman acknowledges the lack of exhibition opportunities for American painters in the 1930s, and notes that in 1940, "Rothko and Solman were given an unparalleled opportunity to participate in a three-man exhibition with Marcel Gromaire at the Neumann-Willard Gallery in New York. Both Rothko and Solman were delighted with the offer to exhibit on equal terms with a noted French painter" (p.33 of the Rothko catalogue). In this exhibition, Rothko showed one of his Subway scenes and two other realist paintings. In the Second Annual Exhibition of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors in May, 1942, Rothko showed a figurative work titled *Mother and Child*, while Gottlieb's *Pictograph-Symbol* was included in the same show.

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the walls of the same museums and galleries, and reproduced and reviewed on the pages of the same newspapers and magazines, as those of acclaimed European artists.⁶¹ The paintings' success proved to American artists that they could succeed in developing an art that was at once personal and universal, while simultaneously achieving recognition and parity with European artists within the gallery and museum world. The Pictographs were available and accessible to artists like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, or Robert Motherwell, who were involved in many of the same artistic issues, but who Gottlieb did not know personally until the mid or late 1940s.

Gottlieb came to the Pictographs out of his frustration with the ability of modern painting to deal with fundamental human issues. He reached this point at a time of world crisis, when European and Asian culture were in cataclysm, and North America was directly threatened. The failure Gottlieb saw in the painting of the late 1930s was that it could not

I raised the question of the dating of these two paintings with David Anfam and Isabel Dervaux, who are compiling the Rothko catalog raisonne. Anfam cites parallels between imagery in *Antigone* and some of Rothko's late figural paintings as indicating a date of 1939. He and Dervaux note that Rothko was working on figural and Mythic paintings at the same time. It is curious that Rothko would have used an unparalleled opportunity, or a show of the artists group of which he and Gottlieb were founding members, to exhibit work that was not his most recent or most advanced.

While it is ultimately not very important to establish which of these two artists launched his new phase first, especially since they worked so closely together, I make this point because Gottlieb's essential contributions to the development of American painting in the early 1940s are usually passed over. Gottlieb's Pictographs, begun in 1941 and produced in significant numbers from that point on, were exhibited frequently beginning in January of 1942. They were formulated and fully developed by 1942. Rothko's Mythic paintings seem to have a longer development time, and he does not seem to have reached a point at which he was satisfied until about 1943 or 1944.

⁶¹. Adolph Gottlieb had been exhibiting in New York since 1929. His work had been reviewed in the major daily newspapers throughout the 1930s, and he was known as a leading figure among younger artists in that decade. In 1939, he was among those who led the secession from the Artist's Congress and helped form The Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors.

Gottlieb received major notices in *The New York Times*, *The New York Post*, *Art News*, *The Art Digest*, *The Nation*, and the *New York World Telegram* in May, June, and December of 1942, and January and February, 1943. His work was included in the Samuel Kootz book *New Frontiers in American Painting*, published in January, 1943, and in several shows, and noted in many reviews throughout that year. The letter to the editor of *The New York Times* by Gottlieb and Rothko, which is often cited among the earliest documents of the New York School, was written and published in June of 1943. In that same month, Gottlieb was selected to exhibit a pictograph (*Pictograph - Symbol*, cat # 5) in the annual invitational exhibition at The Art Institute of Chicago. Gottlieb's *Pictograph #4* (cat # 11) was included in *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America* by Sidney Janis, which was published in early 1944. His painting *Home* (cat # 13) was included in an exhibition organized along with the book and was seen at the Cincinnati Art Museum, the Denver Art Museum, the Seattle Art Museum, the Santa Barbara Art Museum, and the San Francisco Museum of Art. Other New York School artists in this exhibition were Lee Krasner, Byron Browne, Robert Motherwell, Karl Knaths, Ad Reinhardt, Willem de Kooning, Lee Gatch, William Baziotis, Boris Margo, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and David Hare. Also in that year, Gottlieb had a solo exhibition at the Wakefield Gallery in New York, and was included in ten group exhibitions, including the Whitney Museum annual invitational exhibition, at major New York venues.

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come to grips with this elemental disintegration of major societies. Against this background, Gottlieb reached for themes and images which recalled the bases of many cultures; and did so in a specifically calculated way. Gottlieb intuited a connection between the destruction being carried out by "civilized" nations, and the individuals who were responsible for effecting these acts. In this view, individuals are the actors, and, like the characters of classical myths, both responsible for their acts and servants to their fates. Modern theories of psychoanalysis posited a kind of human predisposition to murderous and destructive impulses, and the need for each individual to maintain a balance between these urges and equally powerful creative impulses. Adolph Gottlieb arrived at his Pictographs by combining these classical and modern notions, and by making painting function according to his program⁶². The Pictographs deal with themes of disintegration and integration. They propose a view of the individual psyche as imposing order, in the form of the hand-drawn grid, on the chaos of impulse, memory and history. Like Gottlieb's later paintings, the Pictographs present these opposing themes in a dynamic, fluid state. The threat that the sketched-in imposition of order may be overtaken by the numerous and varied, and unrelated, powerful impulses which exist simultaneously in the human psyche is always present.

The Pictographs also develop the conceptual basis for Gottlieb's later paintings, although the two phases of Gottlieb's work are often referred to as if created by different artists. The vertical paintings which begin in the 1950s and which present a disc shape at the top and a splatter at the lower section, known as the Burst-type paintings (fig 12), and the Imaginary Landscapes (fig 13) which begin around 1950 and are characterized by a horizontal format divided into two discreet but interacting sections, are the types of painting most people commonly associate with Adolph Gottlieb. The Pictographs, which contain numerous bits of imagery, seem too diffuse to fit with the simplified visual presentation of the later work. The element which characterizes all of his work, however, is this artists' interest in what he called polarities⁶³.

The visual differences between the earlier and later phases of Gottlieb's career have led to his work being misplaced in various surveys of the period.⁶⁴ The search for the meaning of each image Gottlieb used, or the search for the specific historic antecedent of each image, often interferences with an ability to see and comment on the totality of a given painting or group of paintings. In the Pictographs, the notion of subject matter⁶⁵, which has

⁶². Item 3 in the letter Gottlieb and Rothko sent to *The New York Times* in June of 1943 states; "It is our function as artists to make the spectator see the world our way -- not his way." from *The New York Times*, June 13, 1943, sec. 2, p. 9.

⁶³. "I think the similarity [between Pictographs and later work] is in my retaining the concept which is based upon a sort of polarity..." Friedman interview, tape 1A, p. 22.

⁶⁴. Those who favor Gottlieb's later works usually dismiss the Pictographs as an aberrant beginning. Similarly, some who value the Pictographs think of the later work as a late conversion to forms popularized by other artists. Both views, in their interest to make a point about the importance of one phase of Gottlieb's work, diminish the importance of the entire body of his art.

⁶⁵. In item 5 of the letter cited above, Gottlieb and Rothko state: "We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless." References to "subject matter" later came into common use among some of Gottlieb's colleagues, and has figured in recent

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proved to be a misleading choice of terms, was the ability of painting -- the making of marks and images on a two-dimensional field -- to communicate spheres of human experience, both personal and cultural, through non-narrative, visual means. In departing from painting's historical reliance on narrative constructions, literal and symbolic, Gottlieb's Pictographs helped revitalize the art of painting. The means employed and the results which followed are as complex as the ambition and the society from which they originate.

re-evaluations of the period. Gottlieb asserted, in the 1962 Frieman interview, that the "tragic and timeless" part of the statement was Rothko's addition.

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Abstract

The paintings created by Adolph Gottlieb between 1941 and 1953, which he labeled Pictographs, constitute one of the earliest of a series of important breakthroughs made by American artists. They are prime examples of the first successful efforts of this generation of Americans to create works of art that were informed by, yet independent of, the art of their European contemporaries. The sources and influences which inform Gottlieb's art include the traditional and contemporary Western art, as well as many non-Western ideas and emphases. This diverse group of references points out the specifically American contribution these paintings make to the evolution of art at mid-century. Most important to the understanding of these works and of American art since the 1930s are the distinct systems of perceptions which developed due to the willingness of American artists to utilize traditional and non-traditional sources and strategies in conceiving of their art. Gottlieb's Pictographs are in the forefront of this important change in artists thinking. The paintings are a wealth of formal and conceptual ideas which remained central to American painting throughout the 1940s and 1950s, and which continue to echo in the work of contemporary artists.

The essay documents many of the critical exhibitions of contemporary art, and the innovative presentations of the arts of all periods, which were held at New York museums through the decade of the 1930s. Also documented are the discussions and debates among and between artists, curators, critics and historians during that decade. Among the many resources available to Gottlieb and the evolution of his thinking, are the exhibitions presented by the Museum of Modern Art through the 1930s. Included are important examples such as the 1935 exhibition of "African Negro Art", the 1936 "Cubism and Abstract Art" and "Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism" shows, surveys of the works of Paul Klee, Joan Miro and others and the "American Indian Art" exhibition of 1940. The importance to Gottlieb and his peers of the availability of so many works of such high quality and great diversity in one local setting can not be overstated.

The Pictographs originate from this cultural activity. Gottlieb's goal in these paintings was to place himself as an informed *and* intuitive artist at the center of the creative moment and, by doing so, to reach beyond what he viewed as the academicism which was stifling the art of painting. Gottlieb's Pictographs, ultimately, are the predecessors of the later forms of Abstract Expressionism. The formal and conceptual ground which Gottlieb broke - the centrality of the individual, the importance of the viewer as active participant, the fusion of meaning and abstraction, the insistence on an abstract image, the painting as object rather than depiction, the reliance on visual presentation rather than narrative or symbolic language to convey emotional meaning, are all fundamental to the later phase of Abstract Expressionist painting. The essay discusses the roots of these notions in the cultural climate of 1930's New York.

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