

V

THE LEGACY OF SIGNS: REFLECTIONS ON ADOLPH GOTTLIEB'S PICTOGRAPHS

Charlotta
Kotik

You have to be able to discover new things in a painting every time you look at it... More than the painting itself, what counts is what it throws into the air, what it spreads.... The painting must be fertile. It has to give birth to a world. It doesn't matter whether you see flowers in it, figures, horses, as long as it reveals a world, something living.

Two and two don't make four. They only make four for the accountants. But you can't stop there; the painting must make you understand that, it must fertilize the imagination.

—JOAN MIRÓ'

The imagination to create a new universe, one wrought from the fragments of fantastic beings and objects as well as everyday reality yet related both to ancient myths and the formal advances of twentieth-century art, was the basis of Gottlieb's Pictographs. This series of paintings is of prime importance within the oeuvre of this eminent abstract expressionist. In this extensive group of works begun in the early 1940s, Gottlieb formulates his unique response to the impasse in American painting that had profoundly disturbed his inquisitive faculties. Equally dissatisfied with the often pious sentiments of regionalism, the aggressive yet uninspiring mode of American social realism, and the mechanistic aspects of geometric abstraction offered by painters of the American Abstract Artists group, Gottlieb felt compelled to find his own voice, one more in tune with the tumultuous events at the outbreak of the World War II.

In the Pictograph series, Gottlieb reconciles the flat planes of geometric abstraction found in Piet Mondrian's painting with the swelling shapes characteristic of synthetic cubism seen in Fernand Léger's work. He also assumed the practice of automatic writing, the exploration of subject matter derived from the subconscious, and the biomorphic forms drawn from surrealism, as expounded by André Breton. At the same time, Gottlieb incorporated certain imagery and techniques from the cultures of the indigenous peoples of the American continents, Africa, and Oceania. Synthesizing the lessons of Western art history with these varied non-Western sources, he forged a new expression, which was uniquely American. With their nonhierarchical composition and their exploration of subconscious subject matter and the spontaneity of automatism, Gottlieb's Pictographs provided a conceptual stepping stone leading toward abstract expressionism and pointing beyond. Moreover, in the Pictographs Gottlieb created a bridge between the paintings of the abstract expressionists and the work of artists of subsequent generations who would react against the all-encompassing hegemony and frequently dogmatic criticism of that very movement.

Adolph Gottlieb meeting his mother, Elsie, in Europe, 1922.



v.i. Adolph Gottlieb
Untitled (Box and Sea Objects)
 ca. 1940
 oil on linen
 25 x 31 7/8"
 © 1979 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb
 Foundation, Inc., New York

Adolph Gottlieb was born in 1903 on New York's Lower East Side. His parents had planned that the young Gottlieb would join the family's thriving stationery business, but early on he demonstrated a special ability and interest in the fine arts. At the age of eighteen, without a passport, Gottlieb traveled to France and witnessed firsthand the artistic innovations and excitement of Paris, the artistic capital of the world at that time. He continued his travels through central Europe and Germany, a much troubled land in 1922 yet one still full of expressionist spirit and the modern masterpieces created before World War I. Gottlieb was interested not only in contemporary art but also in the art of past centuries, especially the work of the Italian primitives and Renaissance masters. In these traditions the drama of Christianity unfolds in narrative scenes that are frequently isolated within the distinct compartments of the painted composition. He also looked at the

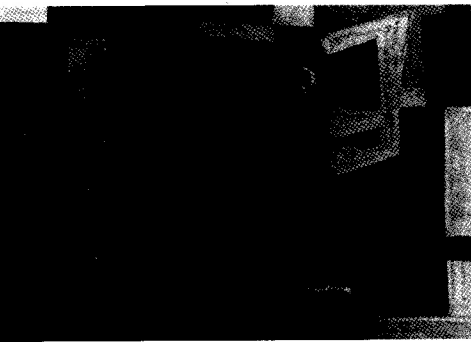
outstanding German and French public collections of works from non-Western cultures, thus gaining a knowledge of the varied civilizations of the world and their collective cultural heritage. The knowledge acquired during his travels early in life greatly enriched Gottlieb's formal and conceptual solutions during the Pictograph period.

Upon his return from Europe, Gottlieb made peace with his parents and finished high school. He then attended the Art Students League, where he met and befriended the painter Barnett Newman, with whom he visited museums to continue his study of old masters, and the Russian émigré artist John Graham, who further encouraged Gottlieb's interest in modern art and later initiated him into collecting primitive art. At the Art Students League, Gottlieb had the opportunity to study with both Robert Henri and John Sloan, American painters of the Ashcan school. After he trained his students in traditional painting techniques, Sloan, like Henri, also advocated experimentation with applying paint directly onto the canvas, without the use of preliminary sketches, in order to preserve spontaneity of gesture and freshness of idea. This essentially proto-abstract-expressionist approach proved to be invaluable for Gottlieb, who created all of his Pictograph paintings in this manner, often mixing various media on canvas and thereby achieving unique surfaces and color modulations.

In 1932 Adolph Gottlieb married Esther Dick, who was also a painter. For many years Esther supported them both by teaching, and thus enabled Gottlieb to concentrate fully on developing his ideas and to paint without major financial pressures. The Gottliebs moved to Brooklyn in 1933, where they befriended several artists, most notably David Smith and his wife Dorothy Dehner, whose interest in the European avant-garde was similar to Gottlieb's own. Here they also discovered the Brooklyn Museum with its diverse collections and an exhibition program that included major shows devoted to Native American art.²

Within the context of today's heightened awareness of cultural pluralism, it is interesting to note how much emphasis there was in New York in the 1930s on exhibiting art and artifacts created by indigenous peoples of the Americas, Asia, Africa, and Oceania, as well as the archaeological finds of Europe. Not only institutions devoted to tribal cultures—the Museum of Natural History and the Museum of the American Indian, for example—but also the recently established Museum of Modern Art delved into the realm outside Western artistic tradition when formulating their exhibition programs. An avid museum-goer, Gottlieb certainly drew inspiration from such groundbreaking exhibitions mounted by the Museum of Modern Art as "African Negro Art" in 1935 and "Prehistoric Rock Painting in Europe and Africa" in 1937. These, together with the grand events such as the Museum of Modern Art's "Cubism and Abstract Art" and "Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism," both in 1936, show the diversity of artistic experience offered to the New York public in the 1930s.

For many artists of the twentieth century, an interest in the cultural artifacts of non-Western societies was translated into a desire to own some of these objects and, through their presence, to be continually reminded of the energy and force believed to be inherently present in them. While it is commonly accepted that Gottlieb's interest in non-Western cultural artifacts informed his Pictographs, there was no simple one-to-one relationship between the images in the artist's Pictographs and the shapes of African masks, for example, or the design of a Native American blanket. These objects were not copied to become components in the composition of Gottlieb's paintings but



rather served as a source of inspiration. Their influence in the work was spiritual and emotive, not physical or rational.

In 1937 Esther's physician advised her to move from New York, and the Gottliebs relocated to Arizona. During their stay there, Adolph Gottlieb at first concentrated on painting still lifes, which allowed him to work indoors and away from the blinding light of the desert. When Gottlieb had adjusted to his new environment, he began to incorporate landscape elements into his repertory, frequently adding a view from the studio window behind a still-life composition. Gottlieb's use of flattened pictorial space can be credited to the intense desert light, which obliterates shadows and demolishes spatial depth, and to his longstanding interest in cubist still lifes and his fascination with Native American art. He was particularly interested in Georges Braque's compositions as well as those of the Mexican painter Rufino Tamayo. One can envision the horizontal tabletop laden with various objects being tilted upright and becoming a vertically oriented plane marked with shapes of ambiguous meaning, a format that became characteristic of his later Pictograph series (fig. V-1). Gottlieb explains:

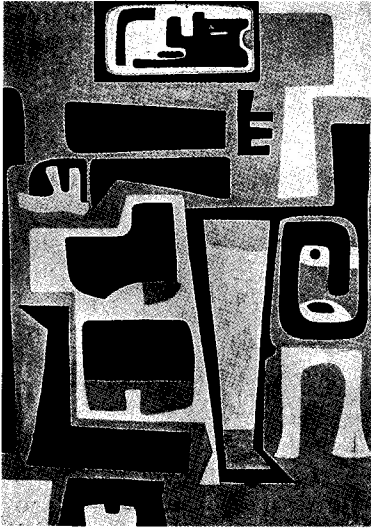
V-2. Steve Wheeler
Untitled (#40)
ca. 1942
gouache on paper
6 1/2 x 11"
Private collection. Courtesy of Snyder
Fine Art, New York.

It was 1937. I had been working for a year in Arizona. My work was becoming more abstract and I became interested very much in the curious things that you find in the sands of the desert. And I'd set them up and make a still life. I started doing that in Tucson. Then I went to the ocean and I found similar things on the beaches. I'd collect these things and I'd set them up and paint still lifes. And then I started painting these objects in boxlike arrangements. They were fragmented pieces of things that had been worn and weathered, and they had no connection with each other. So therefore I divided them, and I made boxes—I painted boxes which had compartments, and each one of these things was isolated, so that you saw it by itself. But then there was a total—a sort of a total combination.....it led to the idea of the pictographs where instead of having a realistic representation of an object in a box, I had more of a symbolic representation.³

The restricted palette of the desert was also important to Gottlieb. He had learned a great deal about the techniques of painting from the writing of Hamilton Easter Field, who advised against the use of primary colors.⁴ The subtle earth tones characteristic of his desert paintings and early Pictographs were achieved through the modulation and expert layering of paint. Despite the beauty of the desert and his interest in American Indian ceramics, which he studied at the Arizona State Museum, Tucson, Gottlieb felt isolated in Arizona and in 1938 moved with Esther back to Brooklyn. At that time, his search for new subject matter and style in painting was already well under way.

Once back in New York, Gottlieb reestablished contact with other artists of his generation, who felt that the possibilities of working within traditional styles and themes had been exhausted. The political climate of the time added to the frustrations of these avant-garde artists, who grappled with defining the role and potential of art in times of social and political change. Gottlieb's social consciousness and organizational abilities had led him to become a founding member of the American Artists' Congress in 1936 prior to his move to Arizona. This organization was short-lived but nevertheless important because it initiated numerous projects that increased the political awareness of artists and the general public alike. The Congress organized such projects as the 1937 exhibition entitled "In Defense of World Democracy—Dedicated to the Peoples of Spain and China" and the 1939 showing of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* in New York. Painted in 1937 in response to the brutal bombing of a Basque town by German pilots acting on behalf of General Franco, *Guernica* deeply moved Gottlieb with its mythical overtones and formal innovations. Derived from his experiments with collage, Picasso's fractured figures exploding across a flattened pictorial field were an important precedent for Gottlieb's own fragmented images in the Pictograph paintings.

The horrors of the Spanish Civil War that were depicted by Picasso signaled the global destruction waiting to strike. Artists responded in many ways, some joining the ranks of the Spanish Republican Army, others reexamining the role of art in society and the responsibility of the artist in times of a threat to the nation. In the United States, the years of the Great Depression had a great impact on artists and their perceived role within society as it at once eroded the traditional client base and offered a possibility of stable employment through the enlightened social programs



V-3. Peter Busa
Children's Hour
 ca. 1948
 oil on canvas
 72 x 52"
 Estate of Peter Busa.

of the New Deal. As veritable employees of the state, artists organized in groups such as the American Artists' Congress and the Artists' Union, forums in which their roles and responsibilities were discussed.⁴ Gottlieb was a member of the Artists' Congress from its inception in 1936, and left it later that year to join the Artists' Union. He soon realized, however, that this group was dominated for the most part by social realists. The activities of the Union and the editorial policy of its magazine *Art Front* did not correspond with Gottlieb's ideas. The rift between him and the political activists only deepened when they supported the Nazi-Soviet pact on nonaggression, which was signed in 1939. Enraged by Stalin's treason against humanist ideas in aligning himself with Hitler and by his colleagues' tolerance of this act, Gottlieb was instrumental in organizing the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors, a dissent group of former members of the American Artists' Congress, who were equally upset by the Congress's political platform supporting Stalinist doctrine of repression and deceit.⁵

As the impending nightmare of World War II manifested itself into a painful reality, the old themes and genres of European art were insufficient to express the inner tensions present in many artists' minds. Western civilization had been unable to contain the spread of Nazism with the forces of reason and rules of democratic government and had failed miserably in preventing this tragedy of immense proportions. The feeling of emptiness and the need to begin anew was prevalent, and every source leading toward the discovery of a way out from this impasse was being investigated.

The spiritual powers inherent in the form and function of artifacts created by tribal cultures were seen by contemporary artists as an important source of renewal during this turbulent time. The art of Native Americans was identified as a distinctly American aesthetic heritage, as a native source of inspiration for modernity, and as a challenge to European artistic hegemony. The great Mexican muralists Rufino Tamayo and Diego Rivera, whose work was well known in New York, had demonstrated the validity of returning to their native heritage as a source of inspiration and transforming it into a potent artistic and social tool for the twentieth-century artist. Adolph Gottlieb and Barnett Newman were also ardent proponents of Native American art and were particularly interested in tribal art from the Northwest Coast. Searching for context and meaning in their work, they were not only concerned with the majestic formal beauty of the objects but also attracted to their spiritual power and their function within the society. In his catalogue introduction to a 1944 exhibition of pre-Columbian sculpture, Newman eloquently identified the relevance of aboriginal American cultural artifacts to contemporary art:

While we transcend time and place to participate in the spiritual life of a forgotten people, their art by the same magic illuminates the work of our time. The sense of dignity, the high seriousness of purpose evident in this sculpture, makes clearer to us why our modern sculptors were compelled to discard the mock heroic, the voluptuous, the superficial realism that inhibited the medium for so many European centuries. So great is the reciprocal power of this art that while giving us a greater understanding of the people who produced it, it gives meaning to the strivings of our own artists.⁶

A whole new school—again centered around the progressive Art Students League—was created in the early 1940s with the values of Native American art in mind, particularly the concept of shallow space without perspective, which the artists of this group termed "Indian Space."⁷ Although Gottlieb was never formally associated with these much younger artists, who later became known as the Indian Space Painters, he shared many interests with them and was a friend of Steven Wheeler, who together with Peter Busa, was one of the most active and accomplished artists of the movement (fig. V-2 and fig. V-3). They had studied many sources analogous to Gottlieb's and were striving for similar pictorial solutions.⁸ As Barbara Hollister explains in the catalogue of the 1991 exhibition "The Indian Space Painters/Native American Sources for American Abstract Art":

The Indian Space artists found in Northwest Coast ideographic art the basis of a pictorial language in which image, symbol, and myth coalesced, functioning simultaneously as art form, historical narrative, and religious icon. They were thus engaged in one of the seminal issues of early abstraction: the merging of language and image.⁹

Free of Western conventions, tribal art symbolized the universal power of rebirth, and its fusion of conscious and unconscious creative powers pointed toward creativity

in its primal stage. The unconscious—or subconscious—was a realm of intense investigation for the surrealists, who saw it as the only true source of creativity. Gottlieb studied Jung's theory of the collective unconscious. The Swiss psychologist asserted the existence of a "racial memory" filled with the imprints of signs and symbols accumulated through the ages that can be released and become an immense source of inspiration if one escapes the dictates of learned repression and stale conventions. The universal need of various cultures to produce myths that help explain the mysteries of life and creation and guide humans through the trauma of death and devastation was of great interest to Gottlieb and his fellow artists at this critical time in history.

Gottlieb's paintings, which demonstrated his interest in imagery derived from myth and the exploration of the subconscious, were included in the Third Annual Exhibition of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors exhibition in 1943. *The New York Times* art critic Edward Alden Jewell reacted negatively to the work in the exhibition.¹⁰ In their famous letter to *The New York Times*, Gottlieb and Rothko responded to Jewell's review and presented a joint statement that formulated their credo most eloquently.

...We do not intend to defend our pictures. They make their own defense. We consider them clear statements. Your failure to dismiss or disparage them is prima facie evidence that they carry some communicative power.

We refuse to defend them because we cannot. It is an easy matter to explain to the befuddled that "The Rape of Persephone" is a poetic expression of the essence of the myth; the presentation of the concept of seed and its earth with all its brutal implications; the impact of elemental truth....

It is just as easy to explain "The Syrian Bull", as a new interpretation of an archaic image, involving unprecedented distortions. Since art is timeless, the significant rendition of a symbol, no matter how archaic, has as full validity today as the archaic symbol had then. Or is the one 3000 years old truer?...

The point at issue, it seems to us, is not an "explanation" of the paintings but whether the intrinsic ideas carried within the frames of these pictures have significance.

We feel that our pictures demonstrate our aesthetic beliefs, some of which we, therefore, list:

1. To us art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risks.
2. This world of imagination is fancy free and violently opposed to common sense.
3. It is our function as artists to make the spectator see the world our way—not his way.
4. We favor the simple expression of the complex thought. We are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth.
5. It is a widely accepted notion among painters that it does not matter what one paints as long as it is well painted. This is the essence of academism. There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art....¹¹

In order to move forward during a time of disillusionment, Gottlieb looked to history for inspiration. He was moved by classical myths, especially those exploring the tragic lot of a hero unable to ward off the destructive forces of fate. Influenced by the ideas expressed in the writings of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, which were much discussed among artists at the time, Gottlieb focused on the myth of Oedipus as the subject of his earliest Pictographs.¹²

Oedipus (pl. 1) and *Eyes of Oedipus* (pl. 2), both from 1941 and considered to be among the earliest of the Pictographs, demonstrate the continuous formal logic inherent in Gottlieb's work. The box compartment inspired by Native American objects that first appeared in Gottlieb's work of the late 1930s here grows into a complex structure of a rectilinear grid that divides the pictorial field into multiple compartments holding the arrested objects. These geometric divisions bring to mind the work of Piet Mondrian, whose paintings were much admired by the New York avant-garde when they were displayed in the Gallatin Collection of modern art at New York University from 1927 to 1943. Thus even before his coming to New York in 1940, this shy and reticent Dutchman exerted much influence through his unwavering

adherence to compositional order and balance expressed through the use of principles of strict geometry. Gottlieb's palette was far from Mondrian's primary colors, however; it retained the pink, beige, and brown hues of the desert. The vocabulary of shapes in both paintings is restricted, the most prominent being the image of the eye. Rendered in light and contrasting paint in the *Eyes of Oedipus*, the eye simultaneously suggests blindness and the sexually charged symbol of an egg. It also alludes to rejection, colloquially expressed in the saying "turning a blind eye": first to the rejection of the infant Oedipus by his father and ultimately to the hero's rejection by his compatriots after he unknowingly violates all accepted social norms.

In 1941 the Museum of Modern Art mounted two more of their influential exhibitions—retrospectives of the work of Paul Klee and Joan Miró. Gottlieb had known and admired Klee's work since his trip to Europe in 1921. Independent of any school, this Swiss artist is among the most poetic and sophisticated minds of the twentieth century. Both his work and the paintings of the Catalan Miró demonstrate conceptual and formal affinities with the interests of the New York avant-garde. While they adopted surrealism's method of free association, Klee and Miró nevertheless remained independent of its dogmatism. Each created his own lexicon of whimsically bizarre signs and personages and affected most of the future artists of the New York School with his imagination and energy. These two exhibitions may have been responsible for the loosening of the rectilinear grid in the Pictograph compositions after 1941, allowing for greater freedom and variety in the juxtapositions of associated shapes.

Pictograph—Symbol of 1942 (pl. 5) displays well many of Gottlieb's formal and compositional concerns. Some of the motifs recall the decorations observed on Native American ceramics of the Southwest as well as the earth-tone color scheme associated with the region. The image of the eye is prominent, as it is in most of the Pictographs. Alluding to the tragic fate of Oedipus in the early Gottlieb series, its presence has multiple significances in the later work. Universally seen as a symbol of perception and knowledge, it also symbolizes inner vision for the surrealists, the sun in Egyptian art, and God Almighty in Christianity. The eye may also signify the evil eye, cast to inflict misfortune—an illness, loss of property, or worse—that is one of the most pervasive myths in the history of mankind. Its terrible effects are mentioned in Sumerian texts, the Bible, and Middle Eastern, Semitic and European folk traditions. The universal fear of the evil eye supports Gottlieb's belief in the collective memory and the interconnectedness of myths that appear in various cultures in different guises but with essentially the same meanings.¹³ But above all, the image of the eye refers to the vision of the artist whose keen observations constantly reveal new perceptions of our reality.

Although no two compositions are alike within the large group of Pictographs, there are some close relationships between them. Two such works are *Pictograph #4* (pl. 11) and *Hands of Oedipus* (pl. 10), both from 1943. In these works, it is the motif of two heads in profile, facing away from each other and joined in the back, that captures our attention. Surrounded by stylized images of eyes and hands, these two profiles allude to the different states of existence. An open eye in one and a closed eye in the other, as shown in the faces in *Hands of Oedipus*, point to the function of the artist who receives the knowledge of the world through his open vision, transforms it through contemplation in his private and closed inner world, and finally relays it in visible form to be viewed by others. The double profile also alludes to the active-passive duality of our existence, wherein both factors are necessary for the safe conduct of our lives.

In *Pictograph #4*, the dual nature of the profiles is heightened by placing one profile in a field of light, the other into a field of dark color. The opposition of light versus dark has been equated with positive and negative, good and evil, safe and dangerous, for centuries and has a similar connotation in this painting. The profile in the dark field, the hand painted in the dark hue, and the jagged motif underneath—a sign of water in Egyptian hieroglyphs—are all reminders of life's perils. The smaller *Pictograph #4* is executed with energetic brushwork and rich colors, while the artist discarded any reference to his own physical energy in *Hands of Oedipus* and kept the symbolism of colors at a minimum. These two works exemplify the duality present

not only in the Pictographs but also throughout most of Gottlieb's work. His were investigations unsolvable with a single answer; the artist's highly analytical intellect demanded multiple solutions to any posed problem in a firm belief that simplification for the sake of clarity does not lead to the discovery of the hidden truths or essential values.

Masquerade of 1945 (pl. 19) has an ominous feeling, accentuated by its dark tonality. The mysterious personages seem to appear from the depth of the painting as if recalled from the dream world by forces of magic. By relinquishing the idea of flatness and of clear delineation with his customary black line, Gottlieb created one of the most memorable works in the series.

Letter To a Friend of 1948 (pl. 48) has the character of a large tablet densely marked with simulated calligraphic signs. Although many of the signs are familiar from his other Pictographs, the overall impact of this work is unique. Based on the exploration of a thin white line outlining the symbols, the work suggests Gottlieb's interest in creating a private alphabet of symbols.

Two works, both of 1948, point to the less-structured composition of the late Pictographs. In the first, *Sounds at Night* (pl. 47), the forms float in the mysterious darkness of the pictorial field unrestricted by geometric compartments, while in *Running* (pl. 51) the black marks sweep over the white canvas in a dynamic ballet.

By 1951, in works such as *Figuration (Two Pronged)* (pl. 63), the geometry of compartmentalization is almost dissolved. Here the stylized figures of a man and a woman remind us of petroglyphs from ancient times, while the patches of color dispersed through the painting are the first signs of the "bursts" that would occupy Gottlieb's paintings from the 1950s to the 1970s.

Throughout the period of Pictographs, which span more than a decade, the artist used a distinct vocabulary of shapes. Some are more abstract than others; most are nevertheless based on the manipulation of the observed. Many of the most prominent figures featured through the whole series—a hand, an eye, teeth, a mask, a spiral, or a jagged-edged motif—were sustained from his earlier representational works. Gottlieb states,

I decided to restrict myself to those shapes which I felt had a personal significance to me. And I wanted to do something figurative. Well I could not visualize the whole man on canvas. I could not see him in a flat space. I felt that I wanted to make a painting primarily by painterly means. So I flattened out my canvas and made these roughly rectangular divisions, with lines going out in four directions. That is vertically and horizontally. Running right out to the edge of the canvas. And then I would free associate, putting whatever came to my mind very freely within these different rectangles. There might be an oval shape that would be an eye or an egg. Or if it was round it might be sun...It could be a wriggly shape and that would be a snake...There would be very little editing or revision.¹⁴

An image maker at heart, Gottlieb used the grid filled with the fragments of various objects in a manner that allowed him to incorporate these figurative elements within a modernist format.

By randomly arranging numerous objects, Gottlieb created compositions without a focal point and without built-in hierarchy, clear progression, or implied narrative. The images were meant to be viewed simultaneously so that the impact would be instantaneous. "There was no chronology," Gottlieb explains, "there was no rational order, the images appeared at random, they then established themselves in a new system. That was why all those years I was able to use very similar images, but by having different juxtapositions there will always be a different significance to them."¹⁵

Gottlieb's development of a lexicon of signs and symbols that he used repeatedly in constantly changing configurations occurred at a time when the theory of semiotics—the science of signs—was widely studied both in United States and in Europe. Building upon the work of Swiss theorist Ferdinand de Saussure, the philosopher and founder of American semiology, C. S. Peirce outlined a rather complex system in which there exists a triad of signs—icon, index, and symbol.¹⁶ A closer look at his definitions of icon and symbol will illuminate some of the aspects of Gottlieb's work. In the icon, the relationship between the sign (the signifier) and the object (the signified) manifests a visual resemblance to the real-life object that has been selected to become a sign. This resemblance is initially necessary so that it can be identified, i.e., recognized by the viewer (the receiver). Thus, a drawn or painted

eye—present in nearly all of Gottlieb's Pictographs—becomes an icon of real-life anatomy. The active participation of the viewer, or interpreter, endows the icon with the symbolic meaning, and the context in which the sign appears transforms the icon into a symbol. In the Pictographs devoted to Oedipus, for example, the eye image ceases to be only an icon as it becomes a symbol of the tragedy of the hero, whose terrible, albeit unwitting, deeds drove him to self-inflicted blindness. The iconic symbols, or symbolic icons, are the signs that Gottlieb selected for his Pictographs. The cognitive nature of perception and the forms that invite the multiple interpretations make the Pictographs meaningful and fresh despite the frequent repetition of signs. "Common artistic experience," writes the Italian philosopher Umberto Eco, "teaches us that art not only elicits feelings but also produces knowledge. The moment that the game of intertwined interpretations gets under way, the text compels one to reconsider the usual codes and their possibilities."¹⁷ These words apply not only to linguistic relationships but to those in the visual arts as well.

Gottlieb himself did not refer directly to the theory of semiotics—as did the Indian Space Painters—yet it is highly probable that he was aware of it. Always interested in literature, poetry especially—his cousin Cecil Hemley was a poet and Gottlieb is known to have written poems in the 1930s himself—his work was influenced by the imagery drawn from literature, such as T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land." Although Gottlieb was not interested in developing a visual vocabulary that would be comprehensible as part of a universal language of signs—such as that of Joaquin Torres-Garcia, whose compartmentalized compositions are often mentioned in discussions of Gottlieb's work—he nevertheless created a private system of symbols, which require an extensive knowledge of his work to decode. Our efforts, if we undertake the challenge, are rewarded not only by a rich cultural experience but also by a greatly expanded worldview through a new look at some very old parts of our cultural heritage.

The series of Pictographs proved important not only for Gottlieb's own work but also for American painting, for we see in these works the first concentrated effort to draw truly innovative solutions from the ideas suggested both by cubism and surrealism, with indigenous American and tribal art acting as a catalyst in setting the whole process in motion. In the history of American art, Gottlieb is a singular figure. He occupies that special place in the art world accorded to the independents—simultaneously revered and neglected. In essence he was a maverick working on his own terms according to his own timing. With the other abstract expressionists, Gottlieb began a revolution that ultimately liberated American art. His accomplishments, however, reached beyond any particular movement because of his unwillingness to conform to the dictums of regionalism before World War II, of surrealism during the war, or of abstract expressionism immediately afterwards. He provided a unique link with the European modernism exemplified in the work of Picasso and Henri Matisse. Gottlieb admired Matisse not only for his feelings for color but also for his superb draftsmanship and steadfast adherence to object. At the same time, Gottlieb connected the cultural heritage of Native American art with that of Western modernism, incorporating an extraordinary feeling for both and an ability to keep the elements distinctly present while according them proper recognition. His was an approach of understanding, of plurality, and of maintaining the specific features of the forms.

Gottlieb continued to concentrate on Pictographs well into the 1950s. However, he gradually discarded the pictographic compartments, thus simplifying the composition by ultimately keeping only one frame—that of the whole pictorial field itself. This frame eventually held two essentially opposing forms—the dynamic, open, and seemingly ever-expanding "bursts" and their counterpart, the hermetic form of a clearly delineated disc. Never yielding to total abstraction but always maintaining the presence of an object through its manipulated image, Gottlieb's Pictographs point to the iconic vision of Jasper Johns and the compartmentalized imagery of the early work of Robert Rauschenberg.

The work of Adolph Gottlieb has not been exhibited widely in recent years. As in previous decades, his work did not conform to the dominant values of the 1980s with its demand for glamour and easy consumption. There is no single biography of the artist and only an occasional magazine article about his work. But despite this sparse showing and scholarship, young contemporary artists are aware of Gottlieb's ideas and seeking to

learn more. The fragmented figure and the ideographic sign are explored by artists both in the United States and around the globe. Painters of various ages, backgrounds, and prominence, such as A.R. Penck and Gert Sonntag in Germany, Carlos Alfonzo of Cuba, or Donna Nelson, Robin Winters, Matt Mullican, and Jonathan Lasker in New York, each recall Gottlieb in their work. Yet much as Adolph Gottlieb himself did not imitate the features of the works he admired, these artists do not follow the ideas set forth in Gottlieb's painting literally but instead recognize kinship with his work. In a time when content in art is once again seriously debated, when the ideas of cross-cultural fertilization are central to understanding the wide scope of art currently being created, the legacy of Adolph Gottlieb once again comes into focus.

NOTES

1. Joan Miró, "Two and Two Don't Make Four," *Joan Miró: 1893-1993* (Barcelona: Fundació Joan Miró, 1993), p. 426.
2. Adolph and Esther Gottlieb's collection of African, Oceanic, pre-Columbian, and Native American objects was bequeathed to the Brooklyn Museum in 1989.
3. Jeanne Siegel, "Adolph Gottlieb: Two Views," *Arts Magazine* 42 (February 1968), p. 30.
4. Mary Davis MacNaughton, "Adolph Gottlieb: His Life and Art," *Adolph Gottlieb: A Retrospective* (New York: Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, Inc., 1981), p. 11. MacNaughton suggests that Gottlieb read Hamilton Easter Field's *The Technique of Oil Painting and Other Essays* (1913).
5. Sanford Hirsch, "Introduction," *Adolph Gottlieb: A Retrospective* (New York: Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, Inc., 1981), pp. 9-10.
6. Barnett Newman, *Pre-Columbian Stone Sculpture* (New York: Wakefield Gallery, 1944), p. 1.
7. Barbara Hollister, "Indian Space: History and Iconography," *The Indian Space Painters: Native American Sources for American Art* (New York: The Sidney Mishkin Gallery, Baruch College, The City University of New York, 1991), p. 31.
8. For further information about Peter Busa, see Sandra Kraskin, *Life Colors Art: Fifty Years of Painting by Peter Busa*, exhibition catalogue (Provincetown, Mass.: Provincetown Art Association and Museum, 1992).
9. Hollister 1991, p. 31.
10. Edward Alden Jewell, "End-of-the-Season Melange," *The New York Times*, June 6, 1943, Section II, p. x9.
11. Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko, in Edward Alden Jewell, "The Realm of Art," *The New York Times*, June 13, 1943, p. x9. Reprinted as Appendix A in *Adolph Gottlieb: A Retrospective* (New York: Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, Inc., 1981), p. 169.
12. Abandoned by his royal parents at birth on the advice of a prophet who foresaw a threat to the king, Oedipus was rescued and raised by foster parents. As an adult, he met and was challenged by a man on a road, whom he kills. Unbeknownst to Oedipus, the man was his father. By solving the riddle of the Sphinx, he proceeds to take his father's place as king and husband of the queen, his mother. After many years and several children, the nature of Oedipus's deeds are revealed, at which time his wife and mother Jocasta hangs herself and Oedipus blinds and exiles himself.
13. For more information on the symbol of the eye in various world cultures, see *The Evil Eye: A Casebook*, Alan Dundes, ed. (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).
14. Adolph Gottlieb, interview with Dorothy Seckler, October 25, 1967, archives of Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, New York.
15. Ibid.
16. For a summary of Peirce's theory, see Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 126-130; for further reading, see *C.S. Peirce, Collected Papers* (8 vols.), Charles S. Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur W. Burks, eds. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931-58).
17. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 274; quoted in Hawkes 1977, p. 142.