

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: PICTOGRAPHS AND PRIMITIVISM

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The decade of the 1940s produced crucial discoveries and achievements for Adolph Gottlieb that established

his reputation as one of the most influential and successful artists of his generation. Intellectually acute and inquisitive, Gottlieb was a great reader and museum visitor. He took full advantage of the varied and exciting cultural resources of New York City, where he was born and educated. Coming of age in the 1920s and 30s, Gottlieb was also part of a generation charged by a cultural (and often political) revolutionary spirit that led its members to challenge the artistic and intellectual status quo and seek new definitions and expressions in the arts.

Gottlieb was active in the avant-garde circles of New York and Brooklyn and also sought to broaden his base of experience by traveling to Europe in 1921–1922, following his teacher John Sloan’s advice to study the masters. His recognition of the importance of understanding a wide variety of cultural and artistic traditions was a major factor in the development of Gottlieb’s art during the 1940s, the decade of his Pictograph series. During the same period, America emerged as an international artistic leader in an environment of change marked by the traumas of the World War II.

In 1939–1940 Gottlieb was at an impasse in his career and uninterested in following any of the current art trends such as regional scene painting, social realism, abstraction, or even surrealism, although he found many aspects of the latter very compelling. Combining different elements of the styles that appealed to him, Gottlieb created a visual expression that was uniquely his own. He was attracted to the work of such artists as Paul Klee and Joan Miró, who had been moving away from the realistic depiction of the visible world to an exploration of flat space, direct painting, and the use of nonspecific, primal signs and gestures to evoke a variety of feelings ranging from joy to mystery and terror. As Gottlieb explored the formal aspects of his art, he also expanded its spiritual foundations and emerged as a stronger, more mature artist. In a 1967 interview he described the process of creating his pictographic paintings.

I felt that I wanted to make a painting primarily with painterly means. So I flattened out my canvas and made roughly rectilinear divisions...then I would free associate, putting whatever came to my mind 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 a Sun or whatever...Now it wasn’t just picture writing. I considered myself a painter. I was involved with painting ideas and making things painterly!

The surfaces of Gottlieb’s paintings in the Pictograph series bear eloquent witness to his love of the physical act of painting. The varied effects created by layers



II-1. False Door (detail) from the tomb of Akhty-Ir-N
Egypt
5th–6th dynasty, ca. 2750–2475 B.C.
The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, The Lillian Z. Turnblad Fund (52.22)

Aaron Siskind
Adolph Gottlieb photographed in his home with objects from his collection of African art.
ca. 1942
Courtesy of Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, Inc. New York



11-2. *Horus Eye*
 Egypt
 19th dynasty, 1297–1185 B.C.
 Faience
 l: 1 9/16" x w: 1 3/4"
 The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, The
 William Hood Dunwoody Fund
 (16.278).



11-3. *Spirit Mask*
 Fang Tribe; Gabon (Ogowe River
 District)
 Before 1905
 carved wood, partly stained
 h: 17", w: 11 1/2"
 The Toledo Museum of Art; Purchased
 with funds from the Libbey
 Endowment, Gift of Edward
 Drummond Libbey (1958.16).

of paint and brushwork patterns give texture, color, and life to the work of art. The built-up layers of paint recall ancient walls that were covered by generations of traditional artists repeating the essential spiritual themes.

In 1955 Gottlieb stated, "I adopted the term pictograph for my paintings out of a feeling of disdain for the accepted notions of what a painting should be."² The artist felt that in order to have a new kind of painting one needed to change its formal means and refocus its ability to express emotion and meaning. He felt a need to eliminate the three-dimensional illusionism that had been thoroughly explored by hundreds of years of Western art and replace it with an unself-conscious method of painting; he sought to use the picture plane as a stage for powerful visual signs expressive of human emotions on a primal level.

At this juncture in Gottlieb's career, he wanted his work to be easily accessible, so choice of subject matter was of prime importance. As a painter of strong will and deep intellectual and artistic resources, he developed his own visual vocabulary based on a growing experience of his inner resources. Gottlieb commented that

..the external world as far as I was concerned had been totally explored in painting and there was a whole ripe new area in the inner world that we all have...I was trying to focus on what I experienced within my mind, within my feelings rather than on the external world which I can see.³

Focusing on the "inner world" led Gottlieb to study the human unconscious and the intense and pioneering research of psychologists Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung.⁴ Their theories explained human behavior and personality through analysis of references and symbols from myths, dreams, and other sources—personal and collective. Their studies also showed that the power of myth, dreams, and the unconscious were understood by tribal cultures. These so-called primitive cultures could provide inspiration for reintegrating these principles into modern Western life.

Artists of many persuasions were attracted by these theories, most notably the surrealists, whose celebration and activation of the creative powers of the unconscious and the world of dreams were important elements of the international art world from the mid-1920s through the 1940s. Gottlieb acknowledged this relationship in a discussion of the ways in which he used pictographic symbols in his paintings: "It was a complex process....I thought of it as related to the automatic writing the surrealists were interested in."⁵ Gottlieb, like many American artists of his generation had a strong interest in surrealist theory and art that featured automatic techniques, which fostered free expression of the creative unconscious. The surrealists' efforts to encourage an "automatic" flow of words, ideas, and images without the mediating filter of the conscious mind was first developed by André Breton and other writers and poets associated with the movement. In the late 1920s, surrealist artists such as André Masson adapted this approach to the creation of drawings and paintings. Masson would let his pen wander over the paper creating a complex web of overlapping lines. He would then use this freely formed matrix as a stimulus to his imagination, finding within it suggestions of forms which would be emphasized by further drawing. Max Ernst was also very involved with automatic techniques that used random textures and other visual elements dictated by chance as creative irritants that gave birth to an enchanting variety of images. During the early 1940s many of the leading figures in the surrealist movement came from Europe as political refugees, bringing their interest in primitivism and primitive art to the cultural life of New York. Gottlieb, who had been collecting African sculpture for a decade, likewise incorporated this influence in the Pictograph series.⁶

Born out of the revolutionary cultural nihilism of the Dada movement, surrealism offered a positive alternative to those writers, poets, and visual artists who sought a new philosophical center for their lives and art. As it rejected the old values and aesthetics of Europe, surrealism sought to refocus political, moral, and artistic values on the fundamental elements of human nature as expressed in ancient myths, tribal cultures, and the new studies of the human unconscious. At a time of acute world crisis when wars of inconceivable proportions had traumatized millions of people, twentieth-century movements like surrealism searched for sources of strength deep within cultural foundations and the most fundamental roots of the



11-4. *Helmet Mask*
Baule; Ivory Coast
19th–20th century
wood
h: 34 5/8" (88.3 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The
Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial
Collection, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ben
Heller, 1958 (1978.412.341).



11-5. *Kpele kpele mask*
Baule; Ivory Coast
19th century
wood
h: 44", w: 26 1/2", h: 17 1/2" (horns)
The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, The
William Hood Dunwoody Fund (62.37).

individual. Popular books such as Sir James G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (first published 1911–15) eloquently demonstrated that many basic forms of mythology were cross-cultural and expressed a fundamental human need to explain and structure basic relationships, emotions, fears, and anxieties.⁷ These writings were based on the belief that myths were codified exemplars of human behavior that offered positive metaphorical models of thought and action. Using these studies as one of their models, the surrealists sought a new mythology that would acknowledge the power of a collective, multicultural worldview as a source of strength for a European culture made bankrupt by the dominance of a highly controlled technological society. By defining tribal groups as "primitive," not in a pejorative sense of being crude but rather in the original sense of the word, which denotes an early, pure, or primal state of being, Western scholars and artists of the time felt that people who lived closer to nature in a less technologically diversified environment were still in touch with a primal consciousness that could be a source of strength to a world in process of destroying its human and physical resources.

Through his broad intellectual interests, travels, and friends, Gottlieb also became interested in the study of primitive cultures and especially their varied forms of visual art. Like many avant-garde European artists of the early twentieth century—from André Derain and Pablo Picasso to surrealists such as Breton, Paul Eluard, and Max Ernst—Gottlieb studied and collected examples of tribal art, which were a continuing source of inspiration to his own creative process. This was especially true in the decade of the 1940s, when Gottlieb developed the Pictograph series that became his first mature expression and formed the basis for his continuing artistic development.

Gottlieb was well aware of the tribal arts from a variety of sources available to him since his student years just after World War I and into the early 1920s. Many art books and magazines published illustrations of the art produced by these cultures. The arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas were also featured in the well-known collections of New York-area museums such as the American Museum of Natural History and the Brooklyn Museum, which Gottlieb frequently visited. While traveling to Europe in 1921–1922 he saw the great ethnographic museums of Paris, Munich, Berlin, Vienna, and Prague. He shared these interests with artist friends in New York: Edgar Levy, David Smith, and John Graham. Graham was especially attracted to African art and was a forceful advocate of the formal as well as spiritual lessons that African art could offer to Western artists. Graham acknowledged the ancient roots and spiritual power of many African cultures in the catalogue of a 1936 exhibition of African art:

These sculptured objects spring, therefore, from one of the oldest art traditions in the world...Its postulates were all based on wholly different principles—on spirit—and on spiritual emotions—or the expansion of the unconscious mind, as opposed to the expansion of the conscious mind.⁸

Gottlieb's early interest in tribal cultures grew, and with Graham's help he began to collect African art and later Oceanic and Native American art. When he visited Europe again in 1935 with his wife Esther, Gottlieb made a special excursion to Belgium to visit the world-famous collections of art from the Congo (now Zaire), which are housed in the Musée Royale d'Afrique Centrale at Tervuren. On that same trip he began his collection of non-Western art with the purchase of five African sculptures from Parisian dealers whose names were probably provided by Graham.⁹ Gottlieb was also influenced by an important group of special exhibitions presented on African, Pacific, and Native American art by the Museum of Modern Art and other New York museums. These first serious investigations of African, Oceanic, and Native American art by the American museum world had a profound effect on their audiences.¹⁰

In the extensive literature on the Pictograph series, authors Martin Friedman, Sanford Hirsch, Diane Waldman, and Mary Davis MacNaughton have emphasized the crucial role that tribal art played in the development of Gottlieb's pictorial style and imagery.¹¹ The artist himself expressed the importance of the art of tribal cultures in 1943 when he wrote about his vital interest in its relationship to modern history and art:



11-6. *Mask*
Songye/Luba; Zaire
wood
h: 16" (40.6 cm)
The University of Iowa Museum of Art,
The Stanley Collection (CMS551).



11-7. *Antelope Mask*
Dogon; Mali
19th–20th century
wood, fiber, cloth h: 20 3/8", w: 6 1/8"
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial
Collection, Bequest of Nelson A.
Rockefeller, 1979. (1979.206.48).

While modern art got its first impetus through discovering the forms of primitive art, we feel that its true significance lies not merely in formal arrangements, but in the spiritual meaning underlying all archaic works.

That these demonic and brutal images fascinate us today is not because they are exotic, nor do they make us nostalgic for a past which seems enchanting because of its remoteness. On the contrary, it is the immediacy of their images that draws us irresistibly to the fancies, the superstitions, the fables of savages and the strange beliefs that were so vividly articulated by primitive man.

If we profess a kinship to the art of primitive men, it is because the feelings they expressed have a particular pertinence today. In times of violence, personal predilections for niceties of color and form seem irrelevant. A primitive expression reveals the constant awareness of powerful forces, the immediate presence of terror and fear, a recognition and acceptance of the brutality of the natural world as well as the eternal insecurity of life.

That these feelings are being experienced by many people throughout the world today is an unfortunate fact, and to us an art that glosses over or erodes these feelings, is superficial or meaningless. That is why we insist on subject matter, a subject matter that embraces these feelings and permits them to be expressed.¹²

Although Gottlieb's references to "superstitions" and "savages" grate on our contemporary sensibilities, they must be put into a historical framework. Much of the material written about African and other tribal arts at this time was very general in its descriptions. The act of perception is grounded in the reality of the viewer. Westerners, traumatized by the violence of World War II, emphasized (almost exclusively) the role of tribal art in addressing people's fears and needs for protection and control in the face of powerful forces of destruction and death. Given this critical and sociological context, it is not surprising that artists like Gottlieb turned to what they considered to be the spiritually and visually effective arts of primitive cultures for guidance and inspiration in the creation of an art applicable to their own historic period.

In his comments on the close relationship of modern art to the primitive, Gottlieb began with a description of the spiritual as well as formal power of tribal art. He paid homage to ancient and contemporary tribal cultures because their arts were important cultural expressions recognized as being essential to the fabric of life. If their masks and statues expressed terror, fear, and brutality, that was because those elements had to be acknowledged and dealt with as a part of the life of groups as well as individuals. This was one of the major aspects of primitive art that attracted Gottlieb, who was searching for a visual idiom that could be used to express his own artistic and ethical concerns. He recommended the visual immediacy and emotional power of tribal art to his contemporaries because they too were preoccupied by the powerful forces that must be expressed in art as well as in political rhetoric. In 1947 Gottlieb wrote:

The role of the artist, of course, has always been that of an image maker. Different times require different images. Today when our aspirations have been reduced to a desperate attempt to escape from evil, and times are out of joint, our obsessive, subterranean and pictographic images are the expression of the neurosis which is our reality.¹³

As he developed the pictorial vocabulary of the Pictographs, Gottlieb was trying to maintain a sense of free association that would bring images out from the unconscious without prejudged, intellectual controls. Gottlieb understood the Jungian theory of the "collective unconscious"—a great matrix of intuitive understanding that forms a primal base that unites all human beings. Like many others, Gottlieb felt that art could function as a means of expressing basic human fears and desires without the necessity of factual, verbal information. In 1943 Gottlieb explained his belief in the universality of art as an effective means of communication:

The artistically literate person has no difficulty in grasping the meaning of Chinese, Egyptian, African, Eskimo, Early Christian, Archaic Greek or even Pre-historic art, even though he has but a slight acquaintance with religious or superstitious beliefs of any of these peoples. The reason for this is simply, that all genuine art forms utilize images that can be readily apprehended by anyone acquainted with the global language of art. That is why we use images that are directly communicable to all who accept art as the language of the spirit, but which appear as private symbols to those who wish to be provided with information or commentary.¹⁴



II-8. *Mask*
 Vuvu; Gabon
 20th century
 wood, carved, polychromed paint, kaolin
 h: 16 3/4" (43 cm)
 ©The Detroit Institute of Arts,
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Max J. Pincus
 (81.913)



II-9. *Mask*
 Lega peoples; Zaire
 early 20th century
 wood, pigment
 h: 7 1/2"
 The Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Mr.
 and Mrs. John A. Friede (74.121.6).

Gottlieb understood artistic communication to take place on an intuitive, emotional level rather than as rational, intellectual information to be strictly decoded and understood within absolute boundaries. As Lawrence Alloway noted, "Gottlieb told me that when he happened to learn of preexisting meanings attached to any of his pictographs, they became unusable. The signs needed to be evocative, but unassigned."¹⁵

Gottlieb intended the language of his pictographic images to be mysterious and obscure, like the record of an ancient oracle whose pronouncements remain a familiar yet unresolved riddle. In 1947 the artist wrote:

I did have certain symbols that were repeated and carried over from one painting to another. But my favorite symbols were those which I didn't understand. If I knew too well what the symbol signified, then I would eliminate it because then it got to be boring. I wanted these symbols to have, in juxtaposition, a certain kind of ambiguity and mystery.¹⁶

Because of his desire not to use immediately recognizable symbols and references, Gottlieb had to avoid directly copying an image or motif from some other source, whether that be another Western artist or a piece of tribal art. In this process he developed a broad vocabulary of generic images, many of whose origins can be found in the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas.

The word "pictograph" refers to an image that defines an idea, or a form of picture-writing such as the hieroglyphic writing used by the ancient Egyptians. Gottlieb's broad experience of world art, including the extensive collections of ancient Egyptian art on display at the Brooklyn Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, formed a library of pictographic images that could be used in his own creative process. Egyptian hieroglyphic inscriptions—eyes, hands, or simplified images of animals—were one of the sources for his pictographic images. The horizontal or vertical linear system that structures the presentation of hieroglyphic writing must also be counted as a source of inspiration for Gottlieb's grid patterns, which created space cells for individual pictographic images (fig. II-1). An example of an image related to Egyptian hieroglyphs can be identified in *Oedipus* (pl. 1), an early pictographic painting of 1941. The eye and heavy curved eyebrow in the upper right corner have a direct relationship to eye imagery used in ancient Egyptian art where it was used as a symbol of life (ankh) (fig. II-2). The mysterious hieroglyphs of ancient Egypt were the earliest forms of art from the African continent to interest Gottlieb. The sculpture of sub-Saharan Africa also provided the artist with another range of images and forms that influenced him throughout the decade of the Pictograph series.

Gottlieb was attracted to the sculpture of Africa as a collector and as an artist searching for powerful visual statements to express the essence of things from our world. His extensive collection of African and other tribal arts was eventually donated to the Brooklyn Museum. As John Graham, his friend, fellow artist, and mentor in appreciating and collecting African art, wrote in 1936,

African artists were never seduced by the desire to imitate or compete with nature, as they had, more than a thousand years before, travelled the long road from realism and exact representation to abstraction—a journey which we ourselves are only just ending.¹⁷

The formal abstraction in African and other non-Western art would continue to inspire Gottlieb as he explored new territories opened by his work on the Pictographs.

An early influence of African art can be seen in Gottlieb's *Oedipus* series, which were the earliest Pictographs. The 1941 canvas *Oedipus* demonstrates this with its curved pattern of eyes connected to a long, straight nose that is a stylistic convention found in many types of African art, such as the face masks of the Fang people of Gabon and many other tribal styles in Zaire (fig. II-3). The placement of this eye-nose matrix in the center of a rectilinear grid section of the painting also transforms that geometric shape into a mask—one of the principal object types in African sculpture. Gottlieb repeated variations of this conventionalized form in related works such as *Eyes of Oedipus*, 1941 (pl. 2), *Phoenix*, 1941 (pl. 3), and many other works throughout the 1940s.¹⁸

In *Pictograph* of 1942 (pl. 4), the artist extended this theme in the center of the top row of his grid by basing this image on a recognizable mask. The rounded horns, hemispherical eyes, strong nose and flat mouth are inspired by a type of buffalo mask used by the Baule people of the Ivory Coast (fig. II-4). This form was used as a dance mask and was also frequently carved in smaller scale on a variety of ritual objects.



11-10. *Reliquary Figure*
Kota; Gabon
19th or 20th century
wood, copper, brass
h: 20 ¼", w: 8 ¾", d: 2 ¼"
The Brooklyn Museum, Adolph and
Esther Gottlieb Collection, Gift of
Esther D. Gottlieb (1989.51.2).



11-11. *Ancestor Tablet*
Elema people; Papuan Gulf
wood; red, black and white paint
l: 58 ¼" (148 cm)
The Saint Louis Art Museum,
Gift of Morton D. May.

Gottlieb owned several works by Baule artists and would have been able to see many examples of buffalo masks through his avid collecting and museum activities. The staring eyes just below the mask form can also be shown to have a precedent in Baule sculpture. The large, vertical ovals with wide circular pupils are clearly related to the eyes used on the Goli mask, another common type of Baule mask frequently found in Western collections that Gottlieb knew (fig. 11-5).

Gottlieb made another strong visual reference to African art in the painting entitled *Augury* of 1945 (pl. 25). The large mask form in the lower right section of the canvas is a reference to a Kifwebe mask (fig. 11-6) made by the Songye people of Zaire. These powerful facial abstractions are marked by a domed forehead, prominent nose and mouth, and boldly painted facial patterns—features that may also be identified in Gottlieb's painting. Even in these few instances of Gottlieb's more literal references to African sculpture he is clearly adapting designs, not copying them. Gottlieb's greatest debt to African sculpture lies not in these or other specific visual affinities but rather in the more generic abstractions that the artist used consistently throughout the Pictograph series.

These influences fall into two basic categories: rectilinear masks and ovoid masks. Rectilinear facial abstraction was used frequently by Gottlieb because it is so directly related to the formal elements of the grid pattern that provide the underlying structure for the Pictograph series and continued to play a vital role in Gottlieb's paintings of the early 1950s, such as *Hidden Image*, 1953. There are many precedents for this form in mask designs from a wide variety of African tribal styles that would have been familiar to the artist. Chief among these are the masks made by the Dogon people of Mali (fig. 11-7), whose architectonic forms reflect the towers of their village homes.

The abstraction of the human face into a flat oval is one of the most common forms found in African art, where it is consistently used to delineate the faces of statues as well as masks (fig. 11-8). Gottlieb's oval mask forms range from the elegant simplicity of the two very abstracted designs used in the upper left section of *Expectation of Evil*, 1945 (pl. 21), which resemble the Bwami society masks and figures of the Lega people of Zaire (fig. 11-9), to the generic horned animal mask that the artist used in the top section of *Divisions of Darkness*, 1945 (pl. 26). The oval face painted in the center of the top grid of *Voyager's Return* of 1946 (pl. 34) recalls such objects in Gottlieb's own collection as the brass-covered Kota reliquary figure from Gabon (fig. 11-10) and the elegantly carved wooden masks of the Dan people of the Ivory Coast.

Gottlieb was also familiar with the arts of Oceania, whose Pacific Island cultures produced a wide variety of sculptural forms that depended on boldly patterned designs for their visual power. He collected several figures from New Guinea. Large, staring eyes with a pattern of concentric circles is a very common element found in many Oceanic art styles but especially in the arts of New Guinea. Another frequently used graphic feature of New Guinean sculpture depicts a ragged, saw-toothed edge that adds an aggressive element to the figures (fig. 11-11). Gottlieb's 1942 painting entitled *Pictograph—Symbol* (pl. 5) features sharp-toothed outlines and open, staring eyes that recall the heightened emotional presence of the arts of New Guinea.

The traditional arts of Native American cultures also had a profound effect on the development of both specific images and general motives in Gottlieb's pictographic paintings. During his formative years in New York, Gottlieb was first introduced to a wide variety of ancient and historic American Indian art at two of his favorite local museums. Both the Brooklyn Museum and the American Museum of Natural History had excellent collections that represented a wide range of object types and geographic styles. Among their rich holdings from the Americas, displays featuring the Northwest Coast Indian at the American Museum of Natural History are extraordinary in scale, number of objects, and aesthetic quality. Since the 1920s the Brooklyn Museum also has exhibited very fine works of art from ancient Peru and Mexico; a noteworthy collection of ceramics, sculpture, and weaving from the American Southwest; an extensive hall of Northwest Coast Indian art; and broad selections from other regions as well.¹⁹ The Museum of the American Indian developed by George Heye added another rich venue where an interested individual like Gottlieb could see a fine



11-12. *Chilkat Blanket*
Tlingit, Northwest Coast, North America
20th century
wool, cedar
h: 53" (incl. fringe), w: 68"
The Brooklyn Museum. Adolph and
Esther Gottlieb Collection, Gift of
Esther D. Gottlieb.



11-13. *Frontlet*
Tsimshian; Northwest Coast, British
Columbia
wood, abalone shell, ermine skins, sea-
lion whiskers, flicker feathers, cord,
felt, pigment
frontlet only: h: 14 1/4", w: 7 1/2", d: 9 1/4"
The Brooklyn Museum. Museum
Expedition 1905, Museum Collection
Fund (05.588.7413).

collection of American Indian art. In fact, New York's museums offered the best representation of Native American art available to any public audience.

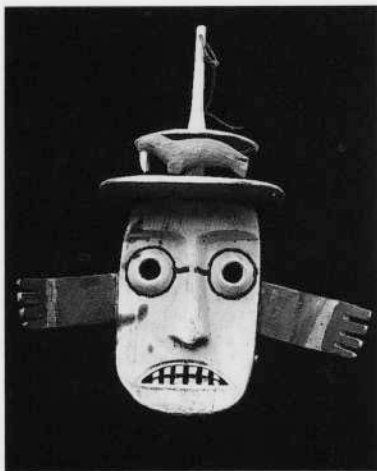
Because of his wife Esther's health, the Gottliebs spent the winter and spring season of 1937–1938 living in the dry desert climate of Tucson, Arizona. At this time he began to move away from landscape painting and concentrated on making still lifes, whose isolated shapes were precursors of the Pictograph imagery of the next decade. Correspondence from this period suggests that although Gottlieb enjoyed the desert environment, he felt isolated from the cultural stimulation of New York. He wrote to a friend that the only art that interested him in the area was the collection of ancient Southwestern Indian ceramics in the Arizona State Museum.²⁰ Seeing these ancient pictographs in their original setting was a powerful and affective experience for Gottlieb. These and an exhibition entitled "Prehistoric Rock Pictures of Europe and Africa," which he saw at the Museum of Modern Art in 1937, provided him with examples of a primal, culturally integrated form of painting that effectively communicated meaning and emotion. The fact that their messages were no longer understood made these works mysterious as well as beautiful or even more attractive as a source of inspiration.

After returning to New York in 1939, Gottlieb had another special opportunity to further his developing interest in Native American art when in 1941 the Museum of Modern Art presented its famous survey exhibition "Indian Art of the United States." Accompanied by a large and well-illustrated catalogue, this exhibition was a landmark effort in the presentation and understanding of the beauty and spiritual qualities of Native American art to non-Indian audiences. It was also a sympathetic and historically accurate description of Native American history and the continuing role of art in their lives.

Significantly, sections of the exhibition and the catalogue were devoted to the Native American rock painting tradition, which the authors called "Pictographs." That Gottlieb would adopt this word as the title for his decade-long series is a sign of the profound effect they must have had on him. Gottlieb's form of pictographic imagery was so close to Native American works that Frederick H. Douglas and René D'Harnoncourt's catalogue description of the range of Native American pictographic images could also be used to describe the variety of forms that Gottlieb would later develop: "Some are entirely abstract, some have highly conventionalized natural forms, and others are remarkably realistic. Occasionally, combinations of all three styles may be found."²¹ The exhibition organizers also emphasized that the meaning of most of these Indian pictographs had been lost, so that like Gottlieb's images they remain visually powerful yet mysterious.

The influence of many types of American Indian art can be seen throughout the Pictograph series, starting with the canvases devoted to the myth of Oedipus. The principal image used to fill these early grid paintings was that of eyes, a motif that corresponds directly to the story of the blinding of Oedipus. While the theme of the eye originates in the Greek myth, a strong visual precedent for the use of eyes scattered across a pictorial design is found in the arts of the indigenous Northwest Coast peoples, which also illustrate mythic themes. In *Eyes of Oedipus* (pl. 2), 1941, Gottlieb's images strongly resemble those on a fine Chilkat dancing blanket made by the Tlingit people of Alaska from his own collection (fig. 11-12). Following a widespread Northwest Coast artistic convention, the Tlingit artist not only used the eye motif to indicate the features of the central face but also placed them at other locations to articulate their complicated, abstract two-dimensional designs, which represent animals, humans, and mythological creatures. In the whale motif woven into the blanket, a variety of eye forms animate the entire design area just as the eyes do in Gottlieb's Oedipus painting.

Other Northwest Coast influences can be seen in *Altar* of 1947, which features a column of abstracted figures strongly reminiscent of carved totem poles. Another reference to this style of Native American art can be seen in the painting entitled *Vigil* (pl. 46), which he completed the next year. The figure in the second column from the left has a squarish head and a set of eyebrows that are clearly inspired by those found in Northwest Coast art, such as the carved and painted Tsimshian chief's frontlet from the Brooklyn Museum (fig. 11-13).



11-14. *Wooden Mask*
probably Kuskwogmiut Tribe, Eskimo;
Good News Bay, Alaska
h: 18"
Courtesy of the National Museum of
the American Indian, Smithsonian
Institution (12/925).

The imaginative masking tradition of the Eskimo peoples of the Arctic was a favorite of the surrealists.²² Gottlieb's interest in these forms can be seen in *The Enchanted Ones*, 1945 (pl. 17). The mask design in the second row of the grid in the top left corner features large, round staring eyes, a downturned mouth, and a pair of curved hands, or flippers, that extend to the sides of the face. This intensely focused face with hands relates to a common type of Eskimo dance mask, such as one that was in the 1941 Museum of Modern Art exhibition and illustrated in its catalogue (fig. 11-14).

Like the influences of African art on Gottlieb's Pictographs, the artist's inspiration from Native American art was more general than in one-to-one affinities with specific works of tribal art. A survey of the Pictograph paintings shows that two of Gottlieb's most frequently used symbols are the spiral and various designs based on the zigzag line. The spiral is one of the most commonly found designs in all of world art. That it was used as an essential element of symbolic visual communication by so many cultures both ancient and historic was of great importance to Gottlieb, who was searching for universally understood images and designs. The spiral can be found in many cultural areas of Native American art, but it is especially prevalent in the arts of the Southwest that Gottlieb favored. The exhibition catalogue of the Museum of Modern Art's 1941 American Indian art exhibition illustrates fifteen works that feature the spiral as a principal design, including a photograph of pictographs from an ancient site in southern Utah (fig. 11-15). These and other Indian spiral forms were a major source of inspiration to Gottlieb in such works from 1945 and 1946 as *Masquerade* (pl. 19), *The Enchanted Ones, Composition* (pl. 22), and *Enigma*.

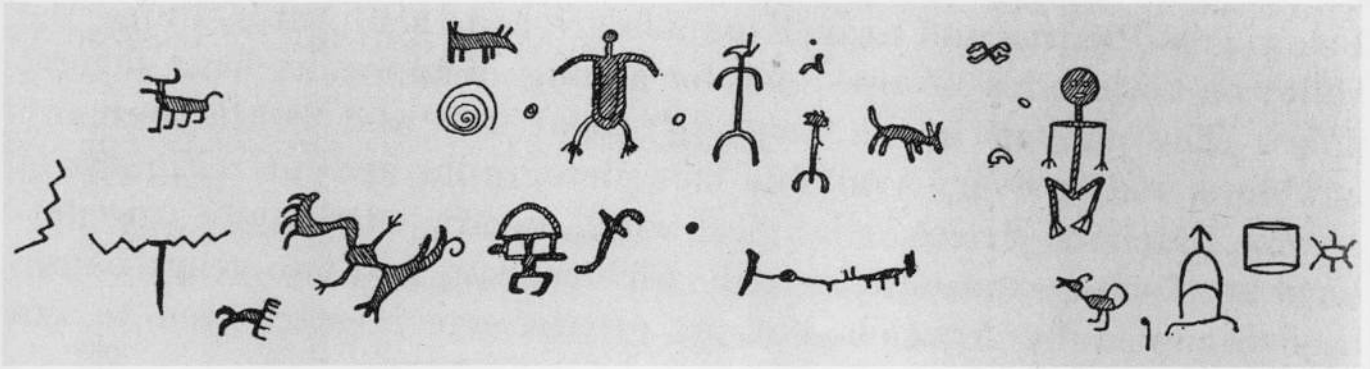
Another elemental Southwest design is based on the dynamically angled zigzag line, which represents serpents, lightning, and rain. This type of energized line, like the zigzag bands on some Maidu baskets (fig. 11-16), was used throughout the Pictograph series: *Hands of Oedipus*, (pl. 10), *Evil Omen*, (pl. 35), and *Sorceress* (pl. 44).

A design motif native to Southwestern people and related to the zigzag is the repeated curve-counter curve that is said to represent a snake and is associated with the life-giving water that made cultivation and therefore Pueblo civilization possible. The undulating curves of the snakes painted on a Zuni jar (fig. 11-17) are another example of a spiritually meaningful and visually effective symbol of Native American art that formed an important source for Gottlieb's Pictographs. Paintings that include variations of the snake design range from *Alkabeth of Paracelcus*, 1945 (pl. 18), to *The Seer*, 1950 (pl. 57).

That Adolph Gottlieb admired Native American culture can be seen in many direct and subtle ways as he incorporated its symbols into the visual vocabulary developed in the Pictograph series. The latest painting in this exhibition is *Figuration (Two Pronged)* (pl. 63), finished in 1951. In it the stark geometry of the grid structure has been softened and patches of color and a group of simple line drawings of figures and faces are superimposed over the now-subordinate linear grid system. The drawings are basic abstractions of the human form and closely related to American Indian pictographic images such as figures from the Ojo de Benado site in New Mexico that was published in Garrick Mallery's 1893 study of pictographs entitled *Picture-Writing of the American Indians* (fig. 11-18). This influential two-volume work, with more than one thousand illustrations that provide a broad survey of Native American anthropomorphic pictographs, inspired Gottlieb as the spiral and zigzag designs had. Given Adolph Gottlieb's close association with Native American art and its rock-painting tradition, it is fitting that one of his last Pictographs should be so close to the imagery and pictorial surface of ancient Indian paintings. It is an elegant homage to an artistic tradition that the artist admired and respected and a clear example of the close relationship of Gottlieb's Pictographs and his interest in primitive art.

NOTES

1. Adolph Gottlieb, interview with Dorothy Seckler, October 25, 1967, Archives of American Art.
2. Adolph Gottlieb, statement for the 1955 "Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting," University of Illinois.
3. Adolph Gottlieb, interview with Dorothy Seckler, October 25, 1967, Archives of American Art.



11-18. *Petroglyphs from Ojo de Benado, New Mexico*
 fig. 59, p. 98 in *Picture-Writing of the American Indians*, by Garrick Mallery. New York: Dover, 1972 reprint. Originally published as *The Tenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1888-89*. Published in 1893 by the Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C.



11-16. *Cooking Basket*
 Maidu; California
 Purchased in 1908
 coiled: maple sucker shoots, redbud bark, willow shoots
 h: 10 1/2", diam: 16 1/4"
 The Brooklyn Museum. Museum Expedition 1908, Museum Collection Fund (08.491.8677).



11-17. *Jar Drum*
 Zuni; New Mexico
 ceramic, slip
 h: 17 3/4", d: 21"
 The Brooklyn Museum. Purchased in Zuni, New Mexico, 1903 (03.325.3255).

4. Most studies on surrealism acknowledge the essential tie between the movement and psychoanalytic studies. Freud is mentioned most frequently as the resource most studied and admired by surrealist writers and artists, but the work of Carl Jung is also recognized. For examples see Anna Balakian, *Surrealism, The Road to the Absolute* (New York: Dutton, 1970), pp. 123-133; Anna Balakian, *Andre Breton: Magus of Surrealism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); Elizabeth M. Legge, *Max Ernst: The Psychoanalytic Sources* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989); Evan M. Maurer, "In Quest of the Myth: An Investigation of the Relationships Between Surrealism and Primitivism," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1974.
5. Adolph Gottlieb, interview with Dorothy Seckler, October 25, 1967, Archives of American Art.
6. Evan M. Maurer, "Dada and Surrealism," *Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), pp. 535-593.
7. James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (London: MacMillan Co., 1911-1915), 12 vols.
8. John D. Graham, *Exhibition of Sculptures of Old African Civilizations* (New York: Jacques Seligmann Gallery, 1936), p. 3.
9. Sanford Hirsch, letter to the author, July 23, 1993.
10. *African Negro Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1935); *Primitive Art From Africa, Central and South America, Alaska, Asia, and the Pacific Basin* (New York: The American Museum of Natural History, 1939); *Masks* (New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1939); *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* (New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1940); *Indian Art of the United States* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1941), *The Art of Australia* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1941-42). See also Hirsch essay in this volume.
11. Martin Friedman, *Adolph Gottlieb* (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1963); Lawrence Alloway and Mary Davis MacNaughton, *Adolph Gottlieb: A Retrospective* (New York: The Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, 1981); Diane Waldman and Robert Doty, *Adolph Gottlieb* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1968).
12. Clifford Ross, ed., *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1990), pp. 211-212.
13. Ross 1990, p. 52.
14. Ross 1990, p. 210.
15. Lawrence Alloway, "Melpomene and Graffiti," *Art International*, April 1968, p.21.
16. Barbara Rose, ed., *Readings in American Art 1900-1975* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), p. 115.
17. John D. Graham, *Exhibition of Sculptures of Old African Civilizations*, (New York: Jacques Seligmann Gallery, 1936), p. 4.
18. Gottlieb's Oedipus series also was influenced by Max Ernst's famous 1922 painting *Oedipus Rex*, especially in *Hands of Oedipus*, 1943, and *Pictograph #4*, 1943, where the large pointing hand can be traced to the large hand emerging from the window in Ernst's painting.
19. Ira Jacknis, "The Road to Beauty: Stewart Culin's Indian Exhibitions at the Brooklyn Museum," in *Objects of Myth and Memory* (New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1991), pp. 29-44
20. Mary Davis MacNaughton, "Adolph Gottlieb: His Life and Art," *Adolph Gottlieb: A Retrospective* (New York: Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, 1981), p. 22.
21. Frederick H. Douglas and René D'Harnoncourt, *Indian Art of the United States* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1941), p. 97.
22. Kirk Varnedoe, "Abstract Expressionism," *Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), pp. 615-659; Evan M. Maurer, "Dada and Surrealism," *Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art*, pp. 535-593.