

## Looking Back at “The New American Painting” in Europe

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It is no overstatement to characterize the 1958-59 exhibition “The New American Painting” [FIG. 1] as a *landmark event*: it styled itself that way. Organized by the International Program of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the exhibition traveled to eight European countries in a “global victory lap”<sup>1</sup> celebrating Abstract Expressionism before returning to New York for a final bow at MoMA in the summer of 1959. The exhibition receives historical credit for introducing the brushy, enigmatic painting style to a wider audience in Europe; it attracted a polarizing buzz of critical reaction nearly everywhere it appeared. Perhaps born from this critical frisson, competing histories have grown up around the exhibition over the decades since it appeared. It is almost as if Abstract Expressionism’s paucity of figuration and its stubborn refusal to directly communicate meaning necessitated an unusually robust historical apparatus to justify it. “The New American Painting” has thus become “a veritable cottage industry of research” for enterprising art historians, who have deployed the exhibition as evidence upholding their own divergent cultural critiques.<sup>2</sup>

Historians in the 1970s, for instance, variously interpreted the exhibition and, by extension, its subject, as “a form of benevolent propaganda for foreign intelligentsia”<sup>3</sup> or, more baldly, as an American “weapon of the Cold War.”<sup>4</sup> These early histories have proven particularly sticky; only

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<sup>1</sup>Sarah K. Rich “Accolades and Abstraction.” *Art In America* 101, no. 11 (December 2013): 90.

<sup>2</sup>Stacy Tenenbaum, “The triumph of ‘The New American Painting’: MoMA and Cold War cultural diplomacy,” in *Artists and Patrons in Post-war Britain* (London: Routledge, 2017): 114.

<sup>3</sup>Max Kozloff, “American Painting During the Cold War,” *Artforum* 11, (May 1973), 43 - 54.

<sup>4</sup> Eve Cockroft, “Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War,” *Artforum* 12, no. 10, June 1974, 39 - 41.

recently have art historians begun to prod and process the intricacies of this interpretative mode.<sup>5</sup> Missing in the heated crossfire of the historical discourse surrounding this exhibition is often the very making of the exhibition itself. Seeking a return to focus on the art and artists, this essay briefly surveys the formation of “The New American Painting” and its response in Europe through the artworks included on the checklist, the artists’ own reflections on the exhibition, and the contemporary critical discourse surrounding the exhibition.

Self-importantly proclaiming itself as “the first comprehensive exhibition to be sent to Europe of advanced tendencies in American painting,”<sup>6</sup> “The New American Painting” featured 17 white artists (all men except for one): William Baziotis, James Brooks, Sam Francis, Arshile Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, Philip Guston, Grace Hartigan, Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, Barnett Newman, Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Theodoros Stamos, Clyfford Still, Bradley Walker Tomlin and Jack Tworkov.<sup>7</sup> At three of its venues—Basel, Berlin, and Paris—it appeared in conjunction with “Jackson Pollock 1912-1956,” a retrospective exhibition also organized by the International Program at MoMA [FIG. 2]. The artists and works for “The New American Painting” were chosen by Dorothy C. Miller, then Curator of Museum Collections at MoMA, who had previously organized a series of influential “Americans”

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<sup>5</sup> For more on this subject, see Tenenbaum 2017, and David Anfam’s contribution in this volume.

<sup>6</sup> Press release, “The New American Painting, Large Exhibition, Leaves for Year-Long European Tour Under Auspices of International Council at Museum of Modern Art.” March 11, 1958. Museum of Modern Art Archives, available: [https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press\\_archives/2342/releases/MOMA\\_1958\\_0025.pdf](https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/2342/releases/MOMA_1958_0025.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting here that many women and artists of color were significant exponents of Abstract Expressionism, though the scholarly and exhibition record largely ignores their achievements. Recent significant exhibitions and accompanying catalogs have helped to begin addressing this bias, notably Joan M. Marter (ed.), *Women of Abstract Expressionism*, Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2016; and Ruth Fine, *Procession: the art of Norman Lewis*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; Berkeley, University of California Press, 2015.

exhibitions at MoMA featuring contemporary American artists.<sup>8</sup> Along with MoMA's founding director Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Miller was considered one of "the taste makers in New York in the '50s,"<sup>9</sup> widely respected for her deep knowledge of modern art and its makers. Most of the artists Miller included in "The New American Painting" had previously appeared in her various "Americans" exhibitions, including Gorky and Motherwell in 1946; Baziotes, Pollock, Rothko, Still, and Tomlin in 1952; and Brooks, Francis, Guston, Hartigan, and Kline in 1956. Indeed, a significant number of the paintings that graced the walls in these earlier exhibitions later featured on the checklist of "The New American Painting." These included Baziotes's *Dwarf* (1947); Rothko's *Number 10* (1950); and Kline's *Accent Grave* (1955), which appeared on the cover of the Berlin iteration of the exhibition catalog [FIG. 3].

Thus, we might understand "The New American Painting" in 1958 to have crystallized from Miller's substantial previous curatorial project research extending back at least as far as the 1940s. In the catalogs for those earlier exhibitions, the curator often hesitated to impose significant interpretive schema on the divergent practices of these painters. For example, in her foreword for the catalog of 1952's "15 Americans" exhibition, Miller wrote:

Rothko, Still, much of Pollock [. . .] fall within the category usually called abstract, which, as many competent observers have remarked, is the dominant trend in midcentury American painting. Classification of this kind is apt to be inaccurate. If it does not mislead the public it usually annoys the artist, particularly since so many of its terms can scarcely be defined.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For more on Miller's pioneering work during this period, see Lynn Zelevansky, "Dorothy Miller's 'Americans', 1942-63," in John Elderfield, ed. *The Museum of Modern Art at Mid-Century: At Home and Abroad. Studies in Modern Art*, no. 4. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994.

<sup>9</sup> Oral history interview with Grace Hartigan, 1979 May 10. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Online: <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-grace-hartigan-12326#transcript>

<sup>10</sup> Dorothy C. Miller. *15 Americans*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1952: 5.

This careful reluctance to advance interpretation of the work characterized Miller's overall approach to this series of exhibitions. On the subject of meaning, Miller's other catalogs and written materials often deferred to the voice of the artist or indeed the art itself: "Their work will in any case speak for itself more eloquently than any verbal statement," she asserted in the 1956 catalog accompanying "12 Americans".<sup>11</sup> By the time of "The New American Painting", Miller's written contribution to the catalog consisted only of a brief note of acknowledgment to the artists, lenders, supporters, and various others who helped bring the exhibition to fruition.

To assemble the checklist of artworks for international travel, Miller called on MoMA's own recently collected works as well as the deep relationships she had established with New York galleries, artists, and individual collectors (including the Museum's influential high-level supporters). Of the 81 pictures chosen for the exhibition, eighteen of them were lent from MoMA's collection. Another sixteen paintings were promised to the exhibition from five of the most prominent galleries in New York: Stable Gallery, Martha Jackson Gallery, Sidney Janis Gallery, Betty Parsons Gallery, and André Emmerich Gallery. This fact underscores the symbiosis between the Museum and the gallery system in New York during this period: by lending to the exhibition, these gallerists promoted the artists they represented even as they positioned themselves for financial gain through the significant exposure the exhibition offered. As Hartigan succinctly described it: "Those shows established the American artist. And that's the reason that we all started to sell."<sup>12</sup> Several of the rest of the artworks were lent from the collections of MoMA patrons such as Nelson Rockefeller, who was then Governor of New York

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<sup>11</sup> Dorothy C. Miller. *12 Americans*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1956: 5.

<sup>12</sup> Oral history interview with Grace Hartigan, 1979 May 10. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

and a trustee of the Museum. Indeed, by 1958, Miller's relationships with Rothko and Still had degraded so drastically that she needed to secure the private loans to include the famously moody artists in the exhibition without their knowledge or consent.<sup>13</sup>

Once assembled, this collection of paintings aspired to the greatest heights of influence and achievement. Ben Heller, a collector and lender to the exhibition and a close friend of Miller's, described this aspiration plainly in a 1958 letter to the curator: "The exhibit is the equivalent of the Armory Show in reverse and I only hope that the reverberations will be as strong in Europe as they were for us in 1913."<sup>14</sup> This understanding of the exhibition and its potential to reverse the tide of artistic influence across the Atlantic appears both in writing from that era and from later reflections on the exhibition's legacy. In his note in the exhibition catalog, Porter McCray, director of MoMA's International Program, breathlessly described the arrival of Abstract Expressionism and its subsequent impact: "a totally 'new' - a unique and indigenous - kind of painting has appeared, one whose influence can be clearly seen in works of artists in Europe as well as in many other parts of the world."<sup>15</sup> In 1979, Hartigan likewise ruminated on the international diaspora of the Abstract Expressionist style as a result of the exhibition:

And then we were all in the "New American Painting" show that traveled throughout Europe. That's the show that had the big impact on European art and everybody started painting New York abstract expressionism in Italy then, and in France. Somehow, it didn't get to England that much, a few artists picked it up but not many. The English are really too literary to think very abstractly and emotionally, I think.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Oral history interview with Dorothy C. Miller, 1981 May 14. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>14</sup> Ben Heller, letter to Dorothy Miller, March 11, 1958. Dorothy C. Miller Papers, I.14.d. MoMA Archives.

<sup>15</sup> Porter McCray, *The New American Painting, as shown in eight European countries*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1958-59: 7.

<sup>16</sup> Oral history interview with Grace Hartigan, 1979 May 10. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Hartigan draws a distinction between the varying responses the exhibition received at its various venues. Indeed, the eight cities on the exhibition travel itinerary—Basel, Milan, Madrid, Berlin, Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris and London—all brought their own unique historical and cultural positions to bear on the claims of the exhibition. Some contemporary European critics were dubious about the direction of the arrow of influence. Many detected Continental sources for this allegedly “indigenous” American painting: “the roots of this art are European, and are called Fauvism, German Expressionism, Klee, Picasso, sometimes Matisse or Andre Masson's inspired Surrealism,” proclaimed French critic André Chastel in his strident review of the exhibition.<sup>17</sup> Such a skepticism of American painting prevailed in postwar France, which was largely reluctant to acknowledge New York as an emerging center of the art world.<sup>18</sup> This skepticism did not begin and end with European critics; some of the included artists, too, rejected claims of the primordial originality of this self-proclaimed “new” American painting. Pollock, for his part, consistently rejected this line of thinking by referring back to the roots of American Regionalist painting: “The idea of an isolated American painting, so popular in this country during the thirties, seems absurd to me just as the idea of creating a purely American mathematics or physics would seem absurd [...] the basic problems of contemporary painting are independent of any country.”<sup>19</sup> For Pollock as for Chastel, the impossibility of a totally unique idiom arising fully formed on American soil lay in the very nature of art: for them, in seeking

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<sup>17</sup> André Chastel, *Le Monde*, Paris, January 17, 1959. Qtd. in *The New American Painting, as shown in eight European countries*: 13.

<sup>18</sup> Jeremy Lewison. “A New Spirit of Freedom: Abstract Expressionism in Europe in the Aftermath of War.” In David Anfam, ed. *Abstract Expressionism* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2017): 50-96, p. 53.

<sup>19</sup> From the artist’s written response to a questionnaire published in *Arts and Architecture* LXI (February 1944), reprinted in Bryan Robertson, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Abrams, 1961): 193.

inspiration outside of itself, art transcends national borders and engages in influential exchange as a matter of course.

For others, the central problem of “The New American Painting” lay not in its claims of Americanness, but rather in its claims of newness. As a stylistic movement, Abstract Expressionism advanced bold claims about its originality and uniqueness through its bombastic, heady facture: sweeping gestural marks punctuated by bold swaths of color, overdetermined brushstrokes jammed through thick globs of pigment [FIG. 4]. Such a frenzied manipulation of paint suggests the titular action of the Action Painters—the action that was inherent and unique to the hand of each of its practitioners. Under the aegis of Abstract Expressionism, the gestural mark became coincident with the hand of the artist and therefore indicative of his originality, his oneness with the canvas. The painting—the work of art—manifested the absolute expression of the identity of the artist, which became thus inextricable from it. As such, the gestural mark performed its own originality on the surface of the painting as it simultaneously communicated the author’s unique identity. Who needed a signature when you produced a gestural mark? Still, some European viewers scoffed at “The New American Painting” and its claims of originality: “Not one of these painters goes against the current. Not one of them is anti-conformist. There is no spiritual flight,” lamented Leonardo Borgese, art critic for the *Corriere della Serra*, on the opening of the exhibition in Milan.<sup>20</sup> Borgese’s anti-Fascist political views informed his impression of this American painting, which he found too assimilationist to be truly original. Such a line of argumentation recalls earlier negative critical reactions to Abstract Expressionism

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<sup>20</sup> Leonardo Borgese, *Corriere della Serra*, Milan, June 8, 1958. Qtd. in *The New American Painting, as shown in eight European countries*: 8.

in the United States in the early 1950s, which similarly called into question the movement's claims of unorthodoxy:

The attitude behind this art seems to be conservative. The chief element of surprise or shock about it is the fact that the painters themselves seem to believe they are doing something new. But their very celebrity hints at the contrary. It is precisely the success of their work in official and academic circles that permits it to be distributed by the advertising machinery developed some thirty years ago for the use of Modern Art.<sup>21</sup>

For these viewers, it was Abstract Expressionism's insistence on its own originality—and its eventual mainstream success—that indicated its ultimately conservative underpinnings.

Other European viewers similarly echoed earlier American responses as they took the exhibition to task on matters of style and taste. “This is not art - it's a joke in bad taste: Save me from the great string spider webs,” trumpeted a headline in the *Reynolds News* in London on the opening of the exhibition at the Tate.<sup>22</sup> Finding no such humor in the exhibition, an unsigned review in a Brussels newspaper assailed the childlike blasphemies to be found within: “One examines with consternation ink spots measuring two yards by two and a half; graffiti enlarged ten-thousand times, where a crayon stroke becomes as thick as a rafter; soft rectangles, formless scribblings, childish collections of signs...”<sup>23</sup> Objecting to the paintings on grounds of form and composition, such reviewers followed American critics in bemoaning the loss of traditional standards of artistic training as Abstract Expressionism flourished. As British-American critic Geoffrey Wagner, writing in New York, put it in 1954: “Form, composition, spatial and plastic

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<sup>21</sup> Maurice Grosser, *The Painter's Eye*. New York: Rinehart, 1951: 180.

<sup>22</sup> Unsigned, *Reynolds News*, London: March 1, 1959. Qtd. in *The New American Painting, as shown in eight European countries*: 14.

<sup>23</sup> Unsigned, *Le Phare*, Brussels, December 14, 1958. Qtd. in *The New American Painting, as shown in eight European countries*: 12.



construction are at a very low ebb in American art today.”<sup>24</sup> Others blamed not the artists but the curator for the offense of the exhibition: the *Star* of London dubbed Miller “The Woman of Violence: She Delivers 81 Smacks in the Eye.”<sup>25</sup> There was plenty of blame to go around in the wake of “The New American Painting;” some even found fault with the venues for electing to show the work. Following its appearance in Paris, Claude Roger-Marx bewailed “the imprudence of the combined national museums in offering official support all too generously to such contagious heresies.”<sup>26</sup>

Despite the backlash, some cultural observers were indeed swayed by the exhibition’s presentation of a uniquely American ingenuity. German art critic Will Grohmann reacted to “The New American Painting” with gobsmacked confidence in the originality he saw on display: “In view of the large number of great talents, one can speak of an American School; for the first time in the history of art, personalities are emerging that are not influenced by Europe, but, on the contrary, influence Europe, including Paris.”<sup>27</sup> Likewise, in France, Jean Cassou, director of the Musée de l’art moderne, Paris where the exhibition appeared, warned against the temptation to see significant parallels between Abstract Expressionism and European painting. For Cassou, the philosophical roots of American painting—a naturalism descended from Transcendental

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<sup>24</sup> Geoffrey Wagner, *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring, 1954): 3.

<sup>25</sup> Star Art Critic, “The Woman of Violence: She Delivers 81 Smacks in the Eye,” *Star*, London, February 23, 1959.

<sup>26</sup> Claude Roger-Marx, *Le Figaro Littéraire*, Paris, January 19, 1959. Qtd. in *The New American Painting, as shown in eight European countries*: 13.

<sup>27</sup> Will Grohmann, *Der Tagesspiegel*, Berlin, September 7, 1958. Qtd. in *The New American Painting, as shown in eight European countries*: 11.

thought—“stood in distinct contrast to European rationality and restraint.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, a younger generation of European artists viewed the exhibition with a similar recognition of its distinction from the heritage of European painting. Georg Baselitz, who saw the exhibition as a student at the Akademie der Künste in West Berlin, described that influence succinctly: “We'd been adherents of the School of Paris, but this show blotted out that influence and surpassed it.”<sup>29</sup>

Easily seen and recognized from a distance and often used to establish one's own bearings, *landmarks* appear stable and timeless in an ever-shifting world. They are often historical, and thus problematic, because our histories tell us just as much about their subjects as they do about their authors. So it is with the landmark exhibition “The New American Painting”, which positioned itself not only outwardly as a comprehensive survey of “advanced tendencies in American painting,” but also inherently as a salvo of American influence, hopeful from the start of its ability to function as a retort to the Armory show in the United States. Along with other landmark exhibitions of American painting shown in Europe, such as MoMA's own “Modern Art in the United States” (1955-56) and “documenta 2” (1959), it sought to advance American art as an international vanguard. Because it was so aspirational towards its potential historical implications, over the decades since it was organized, the exhibition has functioned as a prism through which Americans and Europeans perceive an American national character (and respond in kind). This, perhaps more than anything, is its legacy: as a landmark, a seemingly stable image to which we can return, again and again, and against which we can discern our own position.

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<sup>28</sup> Jean Cassou, ‘Foreword’, *Jackson Pollock et la Nouvelle Peinture Americaine*, Paris, 1959, n.p. Qtd. in Nancy Jachec, “Transatlantic Cultural Politics in the late 1950s: the Leaders and Specialists Grant Program,” *Art History* Vol. 26 No. 4, September 2003: 548.

<sup>29</sup> “Georg Baselitz talks to Pamela Kort,” *ArtForum* vol. 41 no. 8, April 2003: 10.