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Willem de Kooning, *Portrait of Elaine*, c. 1940-41, pencil (12¼ × 11⅞ in.). Private collection, courtesy Allan Stone Gallery.

The Drawings of Willem de Kooning

Budd Hopkins

In the early fifties, when I was a young student at Oberlin College and first encountered Willem de Kooning's work, I was put off by what I took to be its destructiveness, its unrelenting violence. His contemporaries—Rothko, Pollock, and Motherwell, for example—were easier for me to accept. They produced paintings that were more physically beautiful, works that seemed more crystalline, finished, harmonious. One could rest, emotionally, within their gorgeousness. De Kooning's paintings, though

beautiful in their own ways, seemed very disruptive of traditional aesthetic calm.

I have never altogether lost this feeling about de Kooning's work, but I see it now as one reason for the radical nature of his accomplishment. Jackson Pollock's works—especially his classic drip paintings—have long ago become, to my eyes, lyrical, effusive landscape paintings of a sort. There is a most telling contrast between a 1950 Pollock, such as *Autumn Rhythm*, and de Kooning's 1949 *Attic*, now owned, like the Pollock, by the Metropolitan Museum. It is a little like comparing a late, relaxed Monet waterlily painting with the most structured and anguished Cézanne one can imagine.

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Pollock's rhythms across the "vignetted" field are all easy, direct, nearly dancelike. De Kooning's arcing line, however, dismembers the field with split-second speed and precision. It brings to mind the image of a gaucho's whip snapping a cigarette end from a woman's mouth—deadly accurate, instantaneous, and potentially lethal.

That de Kooning is quintessentially a draftsman should be obvious to everyone by this time, and, if not, the retrospective of his drawings at the Whitney Museum should settle the issue. Yet there remains a basic contradiction—de Kooning is an artist with the equipment of an Ingres but the temperament of a Soutine. Far from crippling him, this profound tension between his technical gifts and his natural emotion has led to the production of some of our century's greatest works.

De Kooning began as an "Ingriste," a perfectionist, an artist of tremendous technical precision. His thorough training at the Rotterdam Academy included drawing from casts and inert still life objects, as well as learning such practical skills as lettering, wood graining and marbling, all requiring absolute technical mastery. In the Whitney exhibition, his *Reclining Nude (Juliet Browner)*, c. 1938, best exemplifies the early de Kooning-as-classical-perfectionist. Line, edge, and tonality are handled with absolute control, and the result is a hypnotically fixed and final image. His subtly varied graphite densities suggest a wide range of flesh, shadow, and atmosphere, and are built up with an obsessive precision that would give pause even to Myron Stout.

Neoclassical drawing, such as Ingres', is bent upon clarifying and defining, and it employs a strictly hierarchical system of detailing. It proclaims a view of the world in which stability is dominant and every object rests in its correct place. Obviously, this is not the world we now live in nor was it exactly Ingres' world, but the arbitrariness and artificiality of holding this viewpoint even tentatively in 1940–41, at a time when war had erupted around the globe, is also clear. De Kooning's *Portrait of Elaine*, c. 1940–41, is really a kind of final attempt at this type of classical perfection. One senses, in this work, that time, circumstances, and de Kooning's un-Ingres-like temperament were beginning to have their effect. Though the figure is posed with traditional ease and the handling is extremely precise, the drawing has other, subtly unnerving overtones. The staring eyes—a de Kooning trademark—break with classical calm and proclaim a new kind of hypervigilance and sensitivity. The cluster of folds near Elaine's left elbow



Willem de Kooning, *Study of Woman*, 1942, pencil (7½ × 4⅞ in.). Private collection, courtesy Allan Stone Gallery.

take on an agitation of their own, as do her slightly Medusa-like coils of hair; these details seem to writhe with their own independent nervousness. There is, within the classical tradition, a psychological development—from Ingres' regal, rosy-cheeked aristocrats, and Degas' withdrawn, neurasthenic gentlemen, to de Kooning's stiffly posed wife and bohemian fellow artists, their fingers and clothes alive and twitching with twentieth-century angst.

The *Portrait of Elaine* drawing marks the end of de Kooning's reliance upon "mastery" and fanatical control. What was about to happen was the full-scale employment of one set of precise technical gifts in dialogue with a very different—and very modern—kind of anguished temperament. This battle between his talent as a draftsman, a clarifier, and his need to go headlong, mindlessly as it were, in an instantaneous outpouring, was the source of his greatest works—those produced between the middle forties and the middle fifties.

Willem de Kooning, *Abstraction*, c. 1945, pencil (8⅜ × 11 in.). Courtesy Xavier Fourcade, Inc.



There are, in the Whitney exhibition, a few transitional drawings. In his 1942 *Study of Woman*, for example, a mass of thick black lines attacks and almost obliterates the arms and torso of a sweet-faced, mannikinlike figure. Her fixed gaze and delicate features establish a classical stability which is then subject to an impetuous linear siege. The mix is one of gentleness and anger, of careful structuring and fast, violent hatching. It is a mix that will, in various combinations, come to dominate the famous woman drawings of the early 1950s.

There are evidently few surviving abstract drawings or paintings by de Kooning from the period prior to 1945, but those which do remain all share a particular formal feature: each has a more all-over compositional structure than the figure works. Since the emotional temperature of de Kooning's figurative and abstract works is nearly identical, the difference between the two modes is more a formal issue than one of content. If he desired a denser, more centrally focussed image, he used the figure; if he preferred a more evenly charged energy field he opted for abstraction. By the time of *Pink Angels*, 1945, de Kooning's preoccupation had shifted to the latter, and abstraction predominates.

At this time de Kooning's struggle with his own facility led to a series of technical innovations. He began to bear down on the eraser, heavily, as a smudging device, and to mix his mediums in unconventional ways. These "anti-Ingres, anti-line" devices were expanded in later years to include the cutting, tearing, and reassembling of his drawings in radical collage fashion, and, eventually, to his drawing the figure with his eyes shut, the most radical measure, in terms of fighting habitual perfectionism and technical control.

The use of the smudged, half-erased line added a new and crucial element to de Kooning's content—the sense of tremendous linear velocity. A long, smeared pencil line appears to be speeding so quickly that the eye cannot register its trajectory, as in a photograph of a moving object taken through a shutter too slow for the speed of the object. The blurred line denotes an unstoppable speed.

This quality is one of the last one would ever associate with Ingres—or with classicism as an aesthetic position, in which stability and fixity and order are central values. As de Kooning smeared his ink or paint or pencil lines, Jackson Pollock, elsewhere, was beginning to rely on poured or dripped paint in swinging rhythms, Hans Hofmann was expanding his repertoire of

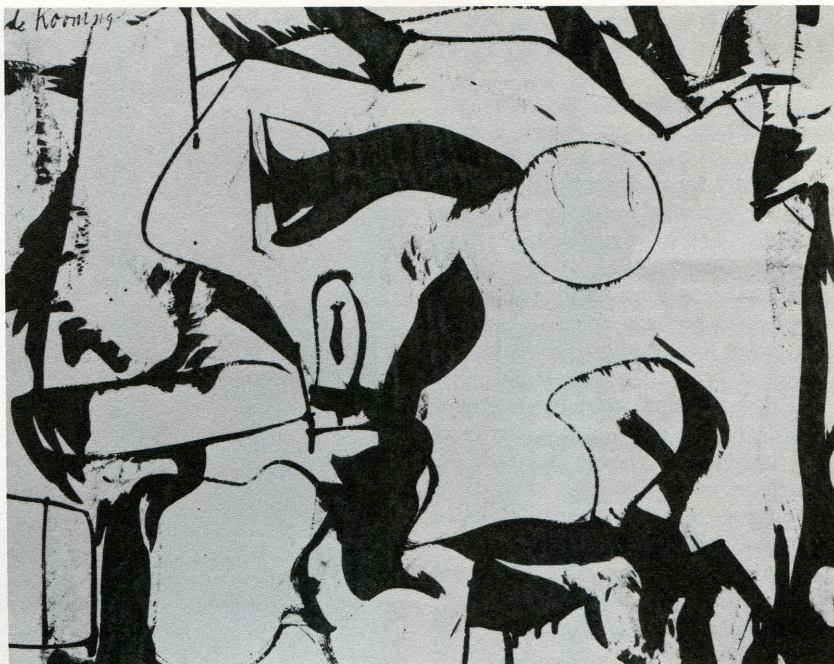
“accidental” painterly effects, and Franz Kline—always a draftsman of implied velocity—was opening the throttle wider. A new consensus was forming which had as a central tenet the idea of speed as both technical method and item of content. Speed seems to have been an American property. Kandinsky’s great early “abstract expressionist” canvases superficially resemble the later American variety, although a Kandinsky was painted more like a Renoir than a de Kooning. The opening up of technical means, especially in the sense of literal and expressive velocity, was at least as much de Kooning’s contribution to the history of art as it was Pollock’s.

De Kooning admits to having been “influenced by everybody,” a half-true but sly remark that actually leaves the issue of influences untouched. Picasso has been a major influence, and, in comparison with him, de Kooning’s originality can be examined rather purely. Picasso was also born with the technical gifts of an Ingres, but his temperament, in many respects, was closer to that master’s than is de Kooning’s. No matter how brutal or distorted the image, Picasso’s techniques always had great clarity and often a distinct classical purity. His line was clean, economical, and precise. It never rushed, never bombarded, never quivered and smeared.

In early 1945, Picasso started work on *The Charnel House*, a painting that recorded the horrifying imagery of the Nazi death camps, just as they were being discovered by advancing American troops. Brutal though the subject matter is, Picasso’s evenly flowing line, with its pockets of coolly rendered ghastly detail, is closer to Ingres than to de Kooning. As a profound image of Hitler’s butchery, *The Charnel House* was widely reproduced immediately after the war.

The Whitney exhibition includes an untitled abstract de Kooning pencil drawing in the Lee V. Eastman collection that was probably done in 1945 and possibly was based upon the Picasso, so similar are the two compositions. It is built out of hurtling, smudged, cutting lines that communicate violence. The sense of headlong speed in such a drawing inevitably carries a violent edge because it suggests a world that is shifting, moving, becoming torn and shredded before our eyes. De Kooning’s vaguely anatomical forms feel dismembered; Picasso’s literal images are coolly depicted as such.

Beginning in 1949, de Kooning executed a series of horizontal ink or enamel drawings, about 22 by 30 inches in size, and in them reached a high point of sus-



Willem de Kooning, *Black and White Abstraction*, c. 1950–51, sapolin enamel on paper (23 × 31 in.). Courtesy Xavier Fourcade, Inc.

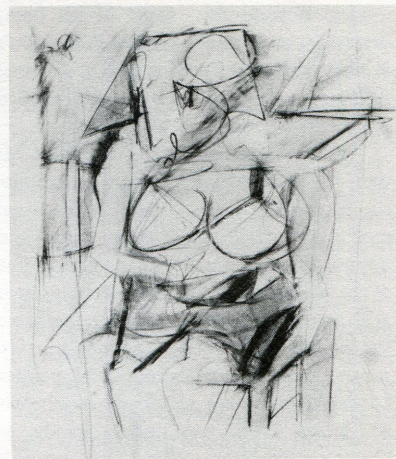
tained invention. They all seem to have been drawn rapidly, with little possibility of revision. To make them, he used a sign painter’s long, liner brush and a palette knife, the first suggesting control and precision, the second impulsiveness and, with ink, a kind of clumsy unwieldiness. The tools themselves represent in pure form the Ingres and Soutine sides of his internal dialogue. The 1950–51 drawing, *Black and White Abstraction*, enamel on paper, is drawn so consummately that positive and negative spaces

interact equally, in ways paralleling the tension and balance between black and white, geometrical and organic, “whole” and “torn,” small and large, line and plane. The closed, geometrical, nearly perfect circle at the upper right operates at one end of a formal and emotional scale that proceeds across a continuum, down to the most torn, shattered, and “impure” shapes located here and there around the margins of the work. Yet, with all its implied violence and starkness the drawing is amazingly beautiful,

Willem de Kooning, *Woman*, c. 1951, pencil (11 × 9 in.). Courtesy the author.



Willem de Kooning, *Woman*, 1952, pastel and crayon (14 1/8 × 12 in.). Courtesy Xavier Fourcade, Inc.



even lyrical in its gracefully arcing lines. It is de Kooning distilled down to his very rich essence.

The woman theme, somewhat dormant through the later forties, erupted with obsessive force in de Kooning's work of the early fifties. Since the image of a standing or sitting female figure is now generally legible, the smudged lines, erasures, and torn edges of his ongoing style translate here into a feeling of personalized violence. It now seems as if woman is a target, a kind of graphic dartboard, subject to every kind of linear indignity. This dark mood of violence is deepened formally because of the focussed nature of the composition. Though one feels the movement of de Kooning's blunt-ended instrument—pencil or charcoal stick—as aggressive and threatening, another, different sense of its purpose eventually makes itself felt. The line begins to feel analytical, dissecting the woman's anatomy with quasi-cubist detachment and precision. Such is the complexity of de Kooning's ambivalent attack that now, thirty years later, the woman drawings seem as simultaneously analytical and emotional as ever.

I have written elsewhere about the "collage aesthetic" as containing the essence of modernism. This concept describes an artwork which contains basically disparate, even contradictory, formal and/or iconographic material, an artwork that is definable in terms of systems rather than one closed, unified system. A Renoir figure painting represents the antithesis of the collage aesthetic: the caressing brush strokes, warm color, snug space, and sensual subject matter are all mutually supportive, the products of a closed, orderly system of method and feeling. De Kooning's figure works, on the other hand, are products of an enormous technical and emotional range of overlaid and intertwined disparate modes. Beyond this, some of his finest drawings, such as the Centre Pompidou's *Woman*, 1952, are literal as well as spiritual collages, made up, as they are, of assembled fragments of other works.

Color is an element that enters his woman drawings with a renewed emphasis, beginning in 1951. Pastel is the usual medium, used in conjunction with—and opposition to—pencil or charcoal. In some of the drawings—as in earlier paintings such as *Attic*—de Kooning's color is remarkable for its full-bodied effect, despite its very subtle, sparing application. The painter Landes Lewitin once described a certain artist, whose work was unduly gaudy, as "having colors but no color." De Kooning's



Willem de Kooning, *Woman*, 1953, charcoal (36 × 23½ in.). Courtesy Mr. and Mrs. S. I. Newhouse, Jr.

works are the opposite; they often seem to have color but no colors. However, in some drawings he sets up an opposition between areas of flat, relatively uninflected hues, and aggressive pencil lines which approach them, become enmeshed, and then escape towards the paper's margins. The handling of drawing and painting as separate but entangled formal systems within the same work is a hallmark of modernism, of the

Willem de Kooning, *Woman in Rowboat*, c. 1964–65, charcoal on vellum (56 × 35½ in.). Courtesy Mr. and Mrs. Norman Twain.



collage aesthetic, beginning most clearly in the cubist works of Picasso and Braque. Nothing in American art makes the same point so clearly as the colored woman drawings de Kooning produced in the early fifties, such as the Los Angeles County Museum's graceful *Woman*, 1952.

"Content," de Kooning once said, "is a glimpse." The word itself implies something sudden, approximate, only half-clear. We refer to a "steady gaze" but a "quick glimpse." His description of meaning is a reference to what I have described as his underlying interest in velocity, a quality he brings to bear on the fixity of his iconlike woman images. The result, of course, is a profoundly unsettling contrast between the stable, ancient, received representation of the earth goddess-mother-female, and a jittery, modern, ambiguous sexual battleground. As in Giacometti's figure sculptures, de Kooning's women have no clear boundaries separating them from their environment. They are sunk into their surroundings, as we, in fact, are sunk into ours.

The staring eyes that are features of so many de Kooning paintings and drawings are very prominent in the women. They are repeated in a work like the Newhouse *Woman*, 1953, by the transformation of the torso into another, larger, face. The breasts become eyes, the nipples are pupils, and the vulva, a mouth. By comparison, Magritte's gentle, European-surrealist use of the same conceit seems minor to the point of inconsequence. De Kooning's employment of a fixed, forward-looking stare has another, more subtle function than low-keyed erotic humor. The viewer takes in the overall activity of the field—the hurtling lines, destructive of edges and surfaces—and fixes on the artist's agitation. But the longer the work is studied, the more it begins to look back at the viewer, its gaze steady and unblinking, even a little intimidating. De Kooning, the artist, is nervous, the woman depicted in the maze of lines is nervous, and finally her staring eyes make us, the viewers, nervous. It is an oddly compelling and disturbing anchor within the work, and the focus of a very real circular, emotional flow.

The period of 1954–60 that immediately followed the woman series represents something of a lull in de Kooning's production of drawings. The large black-and-white oils on paper and ink drawings of this time show a debt to his friend Franz Kline, who, in turn, was indebted to de Kooning for his own increased reliance upon color. De Kooning obviously wished to simplify

Interview: Paul Stiga Talks with Paul Cummings

Robert Caney, Metodoro Conti, Stuart Davis, Claud Lovat Fraser, Alexandre Golovine, Felix Labisse, Kendall Shaw, and Robert Soule are draftsmen who are all too little known for their contributions to the art of drawing. Some are painters who designed for the theater, but some are designers who have made significant contributions to the scenic arts. Collecting designs for the theater is a rare activity in America. Schol-

arship is modest, and few dealers offer the drawings and documents of past productions. Often the very transitory nature of the materials and the rugged use they frequently receive in the mounting of a production lend rarity to their existence. There is a very modest institutional interest in collecting set and costume designs. Of the two or three individual collections in America, one of the most provocative and enlightening

his small, complex forms into larger, more monolithically powerful shapes, and his paintings in this mode are generally more successful than his drawings. The issue, I believe, is involved with complexity. For de Kooning to be most successful, we must feel the mix of elements. Ideally, somewhat contradictory techniques and emotional modes must coexist on the same page. Simple, loose, brush and ink drawings, like the "folded shirt" series, seem virtuoso pieces, not so much anguished as highly skilled—too little Soutine and too little Ingres.

In the late drawings, beginning about 1963, a profound change occurs. The Soutine temperament that had always worked in tense harness with the classic hand now takes over completely, obliterating almost every trace of careful measure, precise edge, and geometrical scaffolding. The upright becomes the curved, the straight becomes the sagging. No longer buttressed by a kind of architectural space, his new woman drawings, such as the powerful 1964 *Woman in Rowboat*, seem to have melted, blended into the charcoal flesh of their surroundings. Many of these works lack the strength of *Woman in Rowboat*; many have a jittery, trembling quality that seems peculiarly apt for these jittery times. Others, such as the drawings done with eyes closed, seem attempts to outflank any last vestige of the draftsman's habitual control. One recent work, the large *Woman*, 1983, has a powerfully Soutine-like presence. It is ironic that there are few (if any) surviving Soutine drawings; de Kooning has taken care of the problem and supplied them for him—posthumously.

The essential trajectory of de Kooning's career involves the predominance of his Ingres-like gift in the work prior to the early forties; then a full-tilt mix of his draftsman's hand and his emotional, expressionist heart in the later forties and fifties; and, fi-



Willem de Kooning, *Woman*, 1983, charcoal (42½ × 34 in.). Courtesy Xavier Fourcade, Inc.

nally, after the early sixties, a broad, anguished emotionalism that seeks to bypass classical restraint, precision, and clear definition. Line—fine, clarifying line—has been replaced by a quivering, side-of-the-charcoal-stick painterliness.

There is, for me in my middle age, a profoundly touching side-effect of this ongoing change in de Kooning's work. It parallels one's own aging in an immediate, visual sense. Youthful, physical precision and clarity is followed by a broader, more humane "prime of life," as the old cliché has it, and then, finally, old age, in which the essentially tragic sense of life comes to dominate one's vision. Picasso, in his last years, rarely created works in this final mood; de Kooning has. Despite the vitality and color and rich painterliness, de Kooning's late works are often tragic, hinting more of chaos than of man's presumptuous illusion of control.

is that formed by Paul Stiga. Raised near Boston, Stiga often attended the theater with his grandmother and soon became a confirmed addict of its magic. He studied at Tufts University, majoring in English, and later continued graduate work at Columbia University, thinking he would drift into the academic world. Finding it "too cloistered and ivory towered," he chose the publishing business. It was only when he came to live in New York that he began collecting. "I guess it was an early love of the theater because I really came into it through the theater. I have not myself had any interest in designing. I'm not an artist. I'm in effect a writer involved with publishers. I never had any great creative urge. I think I was always a great audience."

Boston, as the great tryout town, offered an opportunity to see a variety of new productions. The playbills often featured drawings and sketches of the sets because, as this was in the formative stage of such productions, there were no photographs which would later replace these sketches in the souvenir books. Stiga responded to those delicate drawings.

Later, in the mid-1960s, he was working in New York with a writer who mentioned that the designs Stiga was interested in were on sale at Brentano's. It was there that he bought his first two designs, one by Beni Montessor, the other a little Eugene Berman design for Don Giovanni. "And from then on it became almost an obsessive interest," he stated. Subsequently, Stiga built a library, to study and document his collection. He began with very contemporary works and moved backward historically into the late nineteenth century. Unlike many collectors, who are reticent about their activities, Stiga is an active proselytizer for the encouragement of the study and collecting of designs for the stage. He laments the few useful books on such design, not only for the stage but for the movies. This, he hopes, may be remedied as the public becomes increasingly aware of the delights of collecting such material, which he relates to the decorative arts.

I had read a great deal on the theater, read a lot of plays, a lot of books of drama criticism, a lot on twentieth-century theater. I am not really historically inclined, so that my collection has, in effect, started out as absolutely contemporary and moved slowly backward. It was really an interest in contemporary theater that led me to buying and looking for contemporary design. And then, I became interested in what came before, and then what came before that. I'm now back in the late nineteenth century. It has not been an easy thing to collect. It has been, for the most part, unavailable.