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Willem de Kooning with Maurice Tuchman, 1962

(indistinct chatter) [00:01:00]

MAURICE TUCHMAN
About a decade is all that separates these two pictures of seated women by Willem de Kooning. A very, very awful [reproduction?] of the one at the left, it's a very small drawing. The exquisite portrait at the left of de Kooning's wife, Elaine, was done in around 1940. [00:02:00] The monumental woman at the right was painted over a period of two years, beginning in 1950. I show the two works to indicate the complete mastery de Kooning exercises in two opposite disciplines. One, the one at the left, rendered in control and with restraint every step of the way. The other emerging, always in flux, charged with passion, charged with the spontaneity and multiplicity of psychological life itself.

Yet there is one personality at work in both pictures. And the longer we look at them, the more similar they appear in tone. The earlier work presents a looming presence and unfolds a piercing ferocity, which marks it [00:03:00] as an early step in the direction of the overt savagery of the later painting. In the decade between the two works, de Kooning emerged as perhaps the most fecund and powerful force in new American art. His achievement was first made when the artist was in his forties, after long years of search, experiment, refinement, constant re-evaluation. His achievement was first recognized by a group of New York painters. It was not until *Woman* exploded onto the consciousness of the art world that a larger public was impelled to take a hard look at de Kooning's work. This afternoon, in the last discussion in this series on modern expressionist painters, we will trace the development of de Kooning's style, from the earliest works that are available through the great series of *Woman* paintings, [00:04:00] paintings of *Woman* of the early 1950s.

De Kooning was born in Rotterdam in 1904. His father was a distributor of wines and beers. When he was 12, he left school to become an apprentice in a commercial art firm. He soon enrolled [with a?] full course of evening classes at the art academy there, and he studied the fine and applied arts for eight years. The atmosphere there was lively, but the discipline was thorough and strict, with emphasis upon methods and techniques. De Kooning did have contact with advanced art at this time. He knew the work of Mondrian and the De Stijl group, which was then flourishing in Holland. He also had contact with new French art and with the designs of Frank Lloyd Wright.

In 1926, de Kooning came to America. He was pleased by the freer atmosphere he found here, and by the [00:05:00] visual appearance of New York and its suburbs. And de Kooning stayed. He experimented with abstraction as early as 1928. This, at the left, is the earliest work by de Kooning that I know, an untitled painting of around 1928. The 24-year-old artist here projects an exceptional will, a strong but very conscious sense of ordering.

He sets himself problems, which he will work on constantly for the next few years. In this very early work, he introduces motifs, certain specific shapes, as well as a particular spatial arrangement, that were basic to de Kooning's conscious artistic concerns throughout the next two decades. One of the motifs in this painting is the egg shape, which appears heavily modeled, in three-dimensional fashion, in the foreground. Smaller [00:06:00] and flatter off to the right, and bisected and flattened out still further in the central and upper parts of the field.

The other explicit element that appears here is the vertical stripe, the bright white stripe off to the right of center. It is placed with meticulous precision between the two horizontal movements, so that its ends are both almost equidistant from those horizontals. By rigidly and sensitively dividing the field of the canvas, by stressing the sense of scaffolding of the picture's surface with this strange vertical stripe, de Kooning detains a linear and flat, quasi-geometrical pattern. And he opposes this quasi-geometrical pattern with the two forms, which he models [and makes?] round.

And in doing so in a very conscious, [00:07:00] perhaps in a mannered fashion, the tree -- I'm referring to the tree at the left -- and the large egg shape, which are round, they exist in a relatively flat and linear field. Thus, the painting can be read as a devotedly cerebral and formalistic search, although in the end, a certain mysterious and nonrational effect is transmitted. We shall see the egg, or oval, shape, and the vertical time and time again. But that shape of the tree never again appears in any work of de Kooning's that I know. It's interesting that this broken tree shape was a borrowed one. It is related to certain proto-cubist paintings of Braque, of 1908, such as the one at the right by Braque, *A Landscape of Trees at a Stock* of 1908.

The egg and the vertical appear again, almost [00:08:00] obsessively, in this still-life painting at the left of around 19... Well, still life certainly appears at the right, of around 1929. And several other motifs are introduced in this still life, the vase, the upturned table top, the chair that we see in the upper part of the canvas, and the windows, the rectangular window shapes at the left. The elements that we found in the two early works make up virtually the entire repertory of de Kooning's [formal?] vocabulary. They are ordinary shapes, wedded to quite ordinary objects. But because they are rendered with savage deliberation and with compulsive regularity, especially in the painting at the right, where the ovals repeat innumerable times on the floor [00:09:00] and on the table and above the table in bisected form, the rigid verticals which define window appear in the wall and also in the table legs, all over the canvas. Again, the common is treated with such uncommon intensity so that the resultant image expresses an almost fearful familiarity. And we are not surprised to see a gleaming, dangerous-looking knife on the floor.

More simply, it is mystery, bafflement, enigma which confronts us in these early canvases. Let me mention the vertical stripe here, in the picture at the right, which would appear to be aligned in space with the horizontal and the vertical edge, making an *H* shape. Yet that stripe continues on, into the vase on the table, the vase residing much closer to us in space. [00:10:00] Or take the table, which at first glance, appears to be rendered rather objectively, whereas actually, objective perspective is reversed. The rectangular top should recede. Its sides should incline together. But they flare out. Now take the eggs. They are drawn precisely as they would appear to one standing before a table and looking down on them. Thus here, the perspective is correct. It is as if we see the eggs from the proper vantage point, where we are. But we see the table. We see the table as if we were sitting on the chair next to the window, inside of the painting.

In certain ways, the untitled abstraction of around 1931 is directly opposed to the still-life painting we have just seen. More important than that this one is completely abstract is that there is a [00:11:00] substitution of simplicity for excessive detailing. Emptiness replaces comparative clutter. It is directly related to the picture on the screen at the left. It reveals the continuing spatial problem that de Kooning sets himself.

To grasp this more quickly, we have to visualize the painting in a vertical format. And Paul, would you switch the painting at the right to a reverse format? Here now, the surface is broken into two horizontal lines. Rather, it is broken by two horizontal lines that run from edge to edge, same as happens in the other work. The surface is thereby divided into three areas, the central part, the center part being the largest and the lightest [00:12:00] in value. Just as in the earlier work, a right vertical cuts through the center here at the left. And that right vertical binds top to bottom. So in the work at the right, the edges of the two rectangular shapes are perfectly aligned to form a vertical direction.

And if there is a pointer, perhaps I can make that clear. The two vertical stripes are perfectly aligned, and the space between them is perfectly analogous to this wide stripe. The vertical stripe in the painting at the right is invisible, but its presence is still felt in exactly the same area. Another basic similarity of [00:13:00] spatial organization also concerns the lines that traverse the picture from side to side, seen now. In both these pictures, they are seen now as horizontals. They are not precisely horizontal, however. They are not precisely parallel to the horizontals of the picture frame. In both pictures, it is the same. The traversing lines incline upwards toward the right, thus defining areas that are not pure rectangles but are distorted. They make large trapezoids that are related. The large areas that are broken are thus related to these rhomboids or trapezoids in the canvas.

Basic similarities exist, but the later work is far more ambitious. The aim is to dispense with the symmetry and balance of forces of the earlier work. This accounts [00:14:00] for the destruction of the dark, horizontal band at the upper left in the painting at the right. First, it was evidently drawn so that it would line up in a continuous manner with the movement of that stripe at the right, the sort of discontinuation of a fluid movement that Cezanne had developed in [older?] art. But de Kooning was still dissatisfied with the symmetrical aspect of such a design, and he painted it out. Yet the marks, the imprint of that first solution still remain. And looking at this area from the viewpoint of his later paintings, where all the marks and traces of the continual search are manifest are, in fact, these marks are in fact an essential quality of de Kooning’s later [unfinished?] works. From that point of view, we wonder if that painted-over yet not covered-up [00:15:00] area is not significant, even as an unwitting or unconscious indication of the artist’s latent concerns.

Overt mystery and enigma is again the theme of this untitled painting, also of 1931. And this is achieved not only by spatial ambiguities but also by the use of devices and images that may have been derived from surrealism. The face peering into the window, the mannequin-like figure, the hoop, the imaginary flying creature. The spatial ambiguities center around inside-outside relationships.

Let me just indicate one that is perhaps not obvious at first and which is almost washed out, actually, in this reproduction. The dark path at the lower left leads up to the Dutch door arrangement. But at its right edge, and [00:16:00] that edge is almost washed out, right here. At its right edge, it touches the leg of the table. Is it a path or a foyer? Does it lead into a room? The ambiguity is distinct and deliberate, baffling, faintly disturbing.

Later in the 1930s, de Kooning uncovered, discovered a more expressive vocabulary of forms. He created sweeping curvilinear abstract shapes that call upon a greater formal inventiveness in respect to a specific area. There is a greater power of evocation in works like these. The one at the left is an untitled painting of around 1934. The one at the right, *A*

Model for a Mural for the French Line Pier, that work being executed on a WPA commission in 1935.

This was the [00:17:00] first time that de Kooning worked full time as a painter. Until now, he had supported himself first by house painting, then as a commercial artist working for decorators, and briefly for the department store of A. S. Beck, and incidentally, doing murals for speakeasies. He worked on the Federal Art Project throughout all of 1935, and de Kooning has painted full time, full time ever since.

The abstract painting at the left is conceived, as I said, in forms of greater daring and imagination than previously. There is a corresponding search for a rich variance of expression, the three circular shapes. Again, this is almost washed out, but in the original, it can be seen clearly as a circular shape. The second one I'll refer to is this one. The corresponding search is made for a [00:18:00] rich variance of expression. The three circular shapes in the upper part of the canvas are painted in three different ways. They are imagined in ways that oppose and possibly complement each other. At the left, the circular, sun-like shape is painted thinly, the form composed of soft strokes with no hard, distinct edge but separated and isolated. At the right, a basically circular shape is altered, darkly painted, given a hard edge but merged with another shape, while the third shape I refer to, which is almost indistinct in this slide, in the center is caught in the process of becoming. It is left at a stage where that shape could become like the one at the left or the one at the right. Its seeming incompleteness draws us into the making of the picture.

The painting of Miro [00:19:00] may have stimulated de Kooning in his attempt to create viable forms, abstract forms with a life and vivacity full equal to the real objects we find in the objective world. [I'm?] certain of the shapes in the de Kooning at the right are related to Miro's undulating, rhythmic, decorative patterns, as seen in the Miro painting of 1933.

Now in the later 1930s and through around 1942, de Kooning worked on both figurative and abstract paintings. And I will show some of these without regard to year-by-year chronology. De Kooning's early work has yet to be dated with precision, and the artist's method of working allows him to create in divergent styles in this and possibly in other periods. [00:20:00] De Kooning could draw the figure with a sense of fine detail and the most beautiful nuance and sensitivity, as in this portrait of Elaine that we saw before, a master drawing of its kind. A drawing that calls to mind [Ang's?] famous nineteenth-century portrait drawings, one of which is at the right. In both, we sense the fine search for the perfect line, the exquisite attention paid to the stress of a line, to its weight and strength, its hardness, its hardness, its [breadth?]. To the textures it describes, the wispy thinness of human hair or the substance of bone, and the way line can render the subtlest modulation of light and tone. The similarities are important.

Equally important are the differences between the two artists, manifested here. Differences which necessarily reflect deeply divergent and varying personalities. [00:21:00] First, we see the search in de Kooning for an abstract, absolute form. In his drawing, the oval of the face is stressed, the de Kooning oval that we have already seen in his work. Ang, a neo-classical artist, was also motivated to search for geometrical forms. But the search was primarily made in natural forms. It was less made when Ang made portraits of specific personalities rather than when Ang composed patently mythological or exotic themes.

Secondly, de Kooning projects a fire and a passion, both into his sitter and his style. A greater intensity, a greater directness and immediacy than does Ang, whose classical interest provokes a quality of restraint, with control, with control in the Ang of personal expression. [00:22:00] One last difference that we see between the de Kooning and the Ang, just barely hinted at in de Kooning's drawing, is his search for the irregularity, the common form, seen with such freshness that it looks unusual, even wrong. A hint of this appears around the color. And this, unfortunately, is totally washed out in the drawing. But here, there was originally a line that continues like this. But the color, the irregularity, a chance irregularity in the color is emphasized. [At no time?] does it show. Ang, of course, would have taken such an irregularity and smoothed it out. He would have made it conform to an overall polish, an even sweep.

Now, the greater directness and the force that distinguishes de Kooning's work from Ang at this point in his career is more overt in this [00:23:00] haunting and melancholic, yet crisp, strong portrait of a man. This is a small painting, just 11 by 10 inches. I didn't know that the slide was nearly this bad. This is a small painting, 11 by 10 inches. But we would imagine it to be much larger. There is a breadth and a largeness to the forms, a broad sweep and a thrust in the strokes of the background areas. And this expansiveness co-exists with the close attention to the nuance. For example, to the fleeting facial expression so finely caught, or the spark of light which does not show here at all, the spark of light in the eyes. Or the tremulous movement around his lips.

The hands, which seem possessed by an electric current composed of swift, impulsive strokes. A reminiscent of hands in early portraits by Kokoschka, which I [00:24:00] discussed several weeks ago in this series. The sensitive way those fingertips just barely touch the table or brush against the worn fabric of the coat is transmitted with the control and the skill of a master. This gesture, this hand gesture is strikingly analogous to the method or style of the painting itself. The gesture of the hand is like the imagined gesture of the artist, as he must have painted this impulsive and sensitive and intelligent canvas.

Finally, the way the hands touch or brush an object is directly related to the style of some of the first works we have seen, such as the abstract painting, shown again on its side at the right. Here, an egg shape delicately touches a horizontal line. And the edge, the tip end of a parallelogram [00:25:00] sensitively rests upon a line.

Another work from exactly this time, one which takes off from Ang in another direction, [tawdly?] more consciously felt abstraction, is this painting of a seated man. The vase is the clue to the painting, for in the torso of the man, de Kooning makes an almost desperate search for a fresh view, for a new synthesis of the directly seen, with essential and absolute shape, with pure and perfect design. The goal set by the artist was not fully attained, as evidenced, quite obviously, by the final irresolution and actual avoidance of the placing of the figure's right hand. This is, perhaps, a classic example of the heroic failure that is more valuable than most successes. The relentless [00:26:00] and laborious search de Kooning was involved in in painting the canvas is very much a part of the final quality and nature of the canvas. And so it is in many paintings of this time, as in this untitled work of the late 1930s, two figures.

Paintings such as these are among the first in de Kooning's production that engage the spectator's concern and participation. To a certain degree, this active engagement in the creative act is elicited because the paintings are not finished. We see certain parts or anatomical sections are not there. Or we see the extreme scraping and scratching away, as in the figure at the right, of an area which has left that area still to be resolved. But the problem of the state of completion of a work of art, in other words, when a work of art is really finished, requires extreme caution in our part, especially when we [00:27:00] look at much recent painting, particularly de Kooning's.

It is not a new problem in the history of art. Certain of Michelangelo's late statues, for example, which were always considered to be unfinished, are being re-examined now, now that we feel in them an expressionistic deformation. Perhaps Michelangelo meant them that way. And many great masterpieces of French impressionist painting, which would strike no one today as in any way unfinished, were attacked in their time, even by sympathetic critics, such as Baudelaire, were attacked for being mere sketches, sketches masquerading as finished works of art.

Now with de Kooning, the problem is still more complicated, for a salient characteristic of de Kooning's later work is his explicit dismemberment of the human body. In either case, what is at least implied [00:28:00] here regarding the spectator's involvement with the painter's method becomes more overt and more important in later paintings of the 1940s and in the paintings of *Woman* of the early 1950s.

There is also dismemberment in this painting called *Glazier*. And again, as in the previous works, an open, empty space [flows?] around the figures. Particularly reminiscent of the picture at the left is the disparity between the almost academic precision in the handling of the trousers, the disparity between that and the abstract search made in the torso. The colors and harmonies are quite beautiful here. Again, very, very washed out, retaining none of the luminosity of the original. The [00:29:00] colors and harmonies are quite beautiful and quite original, especially for the date of its execution, around 1940. The lavender shade of the bench, for example, is a difficult one to use at any time. And furthermore, de Kooning isolates it. He does not pick up and repeat that specific shade anywhere else in the canvas. It becomes integrated into the whole, and perhaps just barely integrated, by its value, by the fact that it contains roughly the same amount of light and dark as several other portions in the canvas.

But most important, it is the attitude to the figure that is most pertinent in terms of the artist's development. When de Kooning paints man, the figure seems to struggle into existence. Some parts of him make it, as in the trousers. Other parts remain related to the background, flatly painted, [00:30:00] similar in tone, thin in substance. But when de Kooning, somewhat later apparently, paints women, there is no doubt about her existence. She is as hideous as she is real. Even the background and other spatial forms, ambiguous as they always are in de Kooning's work, are nevertheless more substantial than in the painting of the man at the left and the paintings of other men at the time. Ambiguity here, it should be realized, is quite different from vagueness.

One other allied point. The woman is handled in a unified style. All of her parts share in a similar, aggressive deformation, unlike the male figures, such as the one here, who are split, who are treated half-realistically, half-abstractly. Perhaps [00:31:00] hostility had unleashed [a talent?] of pure and consistent invention. What is certain is that this painting, in its heightened emotional intensity, marks one of the first steps toward the final, overpowering realization of woman early in the next decade.

Pink Lady of around 1944 marks another step forward, as an enriching of the [painterly means?]. Linear elements are relatively subordinated [to?] a bolder palette, with pure, bright colors and the introduction of the flesh color, which the artist has altered and refined in subsequent years. Eventually, de Kooning has produced a shade that is uniquely his own, a de Kooning pink, exclusively his in the way that we think of a Monet pink or a Soutine scarlet or a [00:32:00] Rembrandt brown. Again, the lavender shade, here appearing as pink or white, off to the left. The lavender shade is put in a rectangle and placed off to the side. A brilliant red, not too brilliant here at the right, upper right, is put into a green-framed rectangle at the other side. As forms, we remember that both, both these forms relate to motifs that appeared in the painter's earliest works. Color becomes more intense, consonant with the heightened violence of the forms.

Equally important is the emerging stress on texture as an expressive means. Now, variation in the textures of pigments becomes a basic part of de Kooning's artistic vocabulary, although it will never take the prominent role in his work, or perhaps in the work of any American painter that texture was to take in recent European [00:33:00] painting. Polish, French, or Spanish painting, where the reliance upon texture has given rise to the epithet "matter painting." Here, the first indications of the characteristic de Kooning texture -- rich, juicy, and greasy -- tentatively appear in the flesh and green tones. But in the photographic reproductions, this cannot be seen very distinctly. As we look at the rest of the paintings as well, to keep in mind that not only are the colors inaccurately reproduced, but we also miss an essential aspect of the work when the textural variety is washed out.

In the middle years of the 1940s, de Kooning was becoming the painter's painter to the artists of the emerging New York school. We can most easily grasp the nature of [00:34:00] de Kooning's artistic advance by comparing *Pink Angels*, at the left, of 1945, to a study we saw earlier, done precisely a decade before, the mural study here for the French Line Pier, which was incidentally executed under Fernand Leger. I compared that work, the mural work at the right by de Kooning, to Miro before, to try to bring out the similar use of a carefully delineated, rather lyrical, charming, rather decorative use of abstract shapes. Certain of the shapes here in this later painting at the left are related to those shapes.

But it is the change which impresses us. The forms here in *Pink Angels* are now aggressive and angry ones. They are seemingly mutilated. They are engaged in combat. [00:35:00] Specific elements, such as the eye, which we see in the lower left here, again in this serpent-like shape here, perhaps repeated again here. Specific biomorphic elements imply the sense of destruction and dismemberment. The lines are now often detached from the shapes. They make violent and seemingly random movements. They twitch and turn, or they gyrate gracefully. They describe an elegant oval, as at the bottom, again, resting on the picture frame. Or a line can cascade with density and force, in thick but individual strokes, as seen here.

Most important of all the qualities which make this a [00:36:00] radical picture is that de Kooning has, I think, achieved a kind of synthesis of the real and the abstract, for which he had been searching for a long time. And further, that this synthesis is informed by the kind of ambiguities we observe in de Kooning's earliest work. But now, these ambiguities are richer, more penetrating, and more meaningful. I think this will become clear if I refer to a configuration of forms in the canvas that clearly and rather astoundingly make up a female figure. The pink and yellow areas. This, in the original, of course, is very pink. Everything else is very yellow. Beginning here at the lower left, de Kooning quite specifically marks a female leg. The line continues up. The line continues up this way. [00:37:00] It is broken by a yellow area, but it actually continues on to this pink area, which describes a kneecap. A slight brush here continues that form into a female thigh. The thigh continues into buttocks, into a lower back area. In front, again, beginning with the kneecap, following along the thigh, and then starting up the lower abdomen, directly into a breast shape and leading into the upper half of the body. And at the top, an oval suggests a face, two dots suggest an eye. These strokes [00:38:00] I referred to before suggest human hair. And there are all kinds of possibilities here for arms.

There are, of course, other readings possible right in this area. For example, here we can read this as a second leg. The pink area can be read as a second leg. In that case, this would continue up this way. The kneecap could either be the second leg behind the first leg, or it could be the first leg behind the second leg. I think specific interpretations, such as these, are valid, certainly possible. But I think you will have realized the problems involved in reading paintings like this.

And I want to show a remarkable drawing [00:39:00] from an illustrated German weekly newspaper, which Ernst Gombrich reproduces in his fascinating book, *Art and Illusion*. I show it to illustrate one basic problem in our perception of pictures, such as *Pink Angels*. The drawing at the right is called *Rabbit or Duck?* And while the shape really resembles neither animal very closely, by now, we have probably all seen both the rabbit with its ears and its mouth, and the duck, with its beak. When we see the rabbit, the mouth of the rabbit comes into prominence. But when we see the duck, that mouth is completely neglected. Furthermore, when we see one [00:40:00] animal, we cannot see the other at the same time.

A simple exercise, such as this, brings home the complexity of the visual situations in the de Kooning painting and allied paintings. When we see one configuration, it may have to be completely abandoned before we can see another. And when we see things one way, we automatically and inevitably exclude other possibilities.

We have also become accustomed to the emphasis placed by many modern artists on negative space, to the importance of the empty area between several forms. That area which take son a distinction, a deliberately achieved distinction, which has its own character. But the ambiguity I have pointed to in *Pink Angels* -- say the breakup of that leg area, which I described by means of color, [00:41:00] as well as by linear dismemberment -- this sort of ambiguity marks a new and radical approach, one difficult to characterize, one difficult to interpret, even difficult to clearly see all over the canvas.

Related problems of multiple-meaning forms and the spatial concerns that are inexplicably tied to these spatial concerns were dealt with by de Kooning in paintings from around 1945 or 1946 to 1948. In 1946, de Kooning could not afford to buy oil paints, no matter how inexpensive. Poverty and necessity forced de Kooning to find a substitute. He discovered sapolin, a very cheap synthetic enamel. The series of paintings he then produced are known as the *Positive-Negative Series*. They were shown in his first one-man show at the [00:42:00] Egan Gallery in New York in 1948. The artist was then 48 years old. And it is, of course, significant that he had refused to show, in spite of desperate financial need, until he felt he was ready.

Two of the paintings he finally exhibited in that exhibition are on the screen, the one at the left called *Painting* in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. The one at the right called *Night Square*, also of 1948. Both display the negative quality in this series. Like the forms in *Pink Angels*, the shapes here all bear a disturbing sense of fragmentation of natural forms. The shapes are distinctly organic. And elements of sheer calligraphy fuse and merge with organic or biomorphic forms. They fuse together and swarm in dense patterns over the surface. [00:43:00]

De Kooning solidly covered the canvas with black. Then, he outlined forms in white. Areas between the forms could then be made into background space by filling the areas with white. The process is related to the process of making a woodcut, and it accounts for the negative quality. A similar process occurs when one sketches with white chalk on black paper. Working on a black area permitted de Kooning to execute the swiftness, the swift execution that he sought for at this time. Thomas Hess has pointed out that de Kooning paints the shapes of background and foreground until they blend into one concept. The painting unified as an organism is a unity. Parts do not exist. The destruction of ordinary spatial relationships, of relationships [affigured?] to ground, [00:44:00] is characteristic of much of de Kooning’s work throughout his career.

And it is most clearly seen in paintings such as these, especially in the painting at the left, a masterpiece in this *Positive-Negative Series*. Here, there is no ground against which a shape appears, and there are no in-betweens. There are no pauses or rests. The image is all of a piece. I want to note that two reviewers of the de Kooning exhibition in 1948 made similar and acute observations. Renee Arb, writing in *ArtNews*, remarked, “The painter’s subject is the crucial intensity of the creative process itself.” And the avant-garde painter, Ad Reinhardt, wrote in the New York newspaper *PM*, now defunct, he wrote that “de Kooning not only shows the actual [00:45:00] process of creation. But he asks the onlooker to complete and finish the painting in the looking act.”

In 1949, de Kooning embarked on [still-move?] paths. The direction indicated by this painting of *Woman*, will lead us into the famous *Woman* painting begun the next year. If we compare the later painting, this painting of around 1949 at the left, to the painting of *Woman* we saw earlier, from around 1943, we immediately discern the increased aggression, the heightened violence. Certain of the earlier elements are still apparent, such as the rectangular forms at the upper left and back. But these forms also share in the tumultuous upheaval [00:46:00] and [attack?]. The New Woman of 1949 is made to perform repulsive acts. In the projection of extreme disgust and fierce vitriol, the image anticipates the series of painting of women that Dubuffet would soon paint.

Harriet Janis and Rudi Blesh have sensitively and accurately described the genesis of *Woman I*, now on the screen again, the painting which would become the most famous painting of the 1950s. De Kooning began by drawing a woman’s figure on a canvas. Next, from a poster, he cut the rouged lips of a Hollywood star, and he pasted them on the image. Actually, I [00:47:00] think it was the T-zone from an advertisement for Camel cigarettes, cut from *Life* magazine that de Kooning cut out and pasted on.

Janis and Blesh go on. Then the attack began, a strange, silent battle in fits and starts. In its unnaturally drawn-out compulsiveness, the figure seemed, to de Kooning, to be changing of its own will from beautiful to hideous. Numberless women, perhaps 15, appeared, only to be slashed apart by the furious, muscular brush. And then, in whole or part, scraped away.

Parts of separate study drawings were pasted on. They would put on an arm from a drawing, or a knee. And these parts were tried in twisted positions, even tried upside-down. And then the painting, again, would resume. The scraping was necessary mainly because, on [00:48:00] the one hand, de Kooning could keep the paint thoroughly wet only for a limited time. And on the other hand, he could not summon the superhuman energy needed to complete the magic ritual, for that is what it was.

Within the time, a part of his compulsion, you see, was to realize the whole picture, as it were, in one living skin, coursed through with uninterrupted energies and stretched like a membrane over the canvas. It became an irrational anxiety, that paint kept wet too long, then partly drying, would become rotten, like food.

From early June of 1950 into January or February of 1952, he worked in the method that was by now firmly crystallizing. Flashes, flashes of feverishly concentrated activity, separated by long periods of contemplating the canvas, day and night. [00:49:00] The process must be called extraordinarily protracted rather than slow, for only blinding speed can be seen on all de Kooning canvases from 1950 on, although hours, sometimes days interrupted spurts of action. Even interrupted consecutive brushstrokes.

Suddenly, de Kooning tore the canvas from the wall and threw it into a corner. After sitting for hours, he began three new canvases all at once. A few weeks later, the art historian Meyer Schapiro dropped in. Schapiro saw the discarded canvas, and he and the artist looked at it. When Schapiro left, de Kooning, his interest in the painting restored, immediately peeled off the pasted-on lips and attacked the face. Out [00:50:00] of the slashing strokes emerged a fanged grimace, with curling lips in a pallid, skull-like mask, flecked with blood. Below drug somnambulistic eyes. Now, after two years of stop and go war, *Woman I* rushed to completion in June 1952.

Perhaps never before has an artist placed an image on the canvas in order to attack it physically. Van Gogh painted violently, and so did Soutine. But their paintings were momentary releases from the battle they waged with themselves. De Kooning attacking the canvas attacked himself. Though the icon seemed to be woman, it was her creator, smothering in the nascent paint. Finished it is the [tragic leader of a?] battlefield. No other artist ever left such paintings.

The woman would not be destroyed. Battered and wounded, hideous [00:51:00] yet inexpressibly sad, she still sits implacable, within a storm that will never cease. Gone is the contorted pain of earlier women. Now, on a dozen canvases, fatuously, [tutily?], she stares out with an ancient, wise idiocy. Everywhere are traces of paint, adumbrated shadows of images not quite erased. Webbed in dream, they hallucinate us with motionless gestures. She has just moved. She moves whenever no one watches.

The process of protracted violence, protracted violence can best be seen up close to *Woman*. I have no detail of *Woman I*, but I have a detail of *Woman VI*, the area of the face on the right-hand screen. And I want to compare it to a detail of brushstrokes from a painting [00:52:00] by Soutine. And I think we can see clearly the difference between Soutine's wild, intense, and brief impulse, and de Kooning's incredibly piled-up forces. The successive and incessant layers of paint are all distinct and clear in de Kooning. They are fabulously exciting and complicated. They are capable of enduring the most protracted observance on our part.

The richness of the *Woman* image, the complexity of the image as a painting, can be appreciated when we compare *Woman* to a painting by the English artist, Francis Bacon. Bacon has been associated with de Kooning as a creator of a new and ferocious image of man. Bacon's image, however, seems pre-ordained, not merely because, in this work, Bacon [00:53:00] interprets a previously existing image, the portrait of Pope Innocent X by Velazquez. But because we sense that the transformation that Bacon makes depends on a single idea, a single act of deformation and distortion, Bacon's painting is created from a fixed, pointed, distinct impulse. While de Kooning's *Woman*, incomparably richer and more elusive, as well as more illusive, depends on the infinite complexities of mind and heart of a devoted and painfully sensitive personality.

Bacon paints distorted images. De Kooning makes an image out of and of deformation and combat. In part, this is why de Kooning's *Woman* has aroused the shock and the antagonism that it has. It might seem strange that this is so. [00:54:00] After all, Bacon's images are accepted now, by and large. And when Picasso dismembers and distorts a female, we can even find it charming. Indeed, it often is charming. It's affectionate, filled with warmth, even tenderness, as in the painting at the right. Or, in another painting by Picasso, it can be obviously lyrical. A third Picasso, when Picasso is at his most savage and intense, as in this detail from *Guernica*, from the great painting of *Guernica* in the Museum of Modern Art, woman is mutilated. But first, the destruction of woman is symbolic of mankind, not of a specific sexual attitude. And secondly, the attitude is clearly of protest. Not at all of the explicit ambivalence, the furious merger of [00:55:00] love and hate that is, I think, the expression found in *Woman*.

From point of view of attitude to woman, the closest pictures to de Kooning's Woman that I know, in the history of art, are some by Kokoschka and some by Munch. The Kokoschka, that's ring [at all times?]. Paul, the woman should be on the ground. It's not upside-down but sideways. The Kokoschka, I hope you will see on the screen, is one of his very first works, done when Kokoschka, the Austrian expressionist painter, was 21 years old in 1907. In Kokoschka's work, deep anger and hate has prompted Kokoschka to astonishing formal invention, the type of distortion we see in [00:56:00] [defeat?]. And in the simultaneous view of the faces, with ovals that are merged to frontal views, three-quarters views merged to frontal views, this invention anticipates Picasso's great discoveries along this line that he made two decades later.

I discussed this startling picture of Kokoschka several weeks ago in my lecture at that time. But at that time, I could not show, equally startling though very different works of Kokoschka's, important and all but unknown paintings, which may be of great significance in the evolution of his art, and which uncannily anticipate some aspects of the de Kooning *Woman* experience.

Kokoschka came out of World War I physically and spiritually wounded. His biographer has noted that Kokoschka found all normal contact with [00:57:00] human beings to be unbearable. Kokoschka thought up, since his problem was most pointedly experienced in regard to his relationship with woman, Kokoschka thought up an unusual remedy. He would have a doll made, and the doll would look like his ideal woman. She would be ever present but silent and unobtrusive. On her, he would heap his devotion and his care. She would be his creature. She would serve him in many ways, even as an untiring sitter for his pictures.

He found a woman artist in Stuttgart, who agreed to make the doll. He sent her drawings and wrote her letters, detailing all his requirements. “Please make it possible,” Kokoschka wrote, “for the touch to enjoy those parts [where?] fat or muscles suddenly give way to sinews, and where the [00:58:00] bone penetrates to the surface, like the shinbone. The head must be an entirely faithful representation. It shows exactly the expression of the face, which I always desire and never meet. The belly and the stronger muscles on legs, back, and so forth must have a certain firmness and substance. The woman is supposed to be around 35 to 40 years old. The figure need not be able to stand,” so Kokoschka wrote.

Almost two years went by. Still the doll was not finished. Finally, in February of 1919, word came that the doll was ready. The doll was being shipped to Kokoschka in Dresden. A celebration was staged by Kokoschka’s friends for its unwrapping, for the unwrapping [00:59:00] of the doll. Kokoschka was triumphant as he opened the crate. He was struck dumb when he saw emerge a studiously constructed monster, exactly corresponding to all his extravagant details. Soft in parts, delicately skinned, with moveable limbs, with careful cosmetic, neatly dressed. The doll was eventually buried. But before that, Kokoschka painted the beautiful painting of it at the right, as well as the painting of the artist himself with the doll at the left. In these crisis years, Kokoschka’s style underwent great alterations and transitions before resolving itself into the new and equally brilliant style of his later and most famous landscape paintings. [01:00:00]

When de Kooning finally resolved his compulsive attempt to forge and fix an unforgettable image of woman, he, too, would never be the same as a painter, nor perhaps as a man. He, too, would create powerful visions of landscape, never seen before in history. And when he returns to the female, as we shall see, and as he is doing today, it is with a sense of resolution.

Now, many artists working in the expressionist tradition have made women an essential part of their artistic concern, none more so than Edvard Munch, as seen, that’s sideways. As almost seen in the woodcut at the right, where woman, now that’s upside down. [01:01:00] Here it comes. You’ll see. As soon in the woodcut at the right by Munch, where woman fills man’s brain. Or here, where woman is vampire. But most interesting are the three types of woman that Munch conceives. I discussed this lithograph and related works to it of the 1890s at length in my first lecture in this series. All that is pertinent to us here is Munch’s view that there are three possibilities in women: the wraith-like and virginal maiden at the right, the maternal figure at the left, the naked voluptuary in the center. All three are dangerous to man, but the central figure is obviously the greatest menace, the most forceful threat. She is the vampire.

De Kooning’s woman is most closely related [01:02:00] in type to this voluptuary figure. But she, de Kooning’s woman, like the painting itself, is very much a product of its time, of the early 1950s. And very much a product of its place, its place of origin, America.

In closing my discussion this afternoon, I want to relate de Kooning’s woman type to, first, certain attitudes. Put that out, Paul. First, there goes my [tagline?]. First, to certain attitudes to sex that came into prominence within the past decade. And finally, to a new, ubiquitous, and pervasive mass image of woman. The new attitude to sex, more specifically, to the sexual act, is best reflected and most apparent in the writings of Norman [01:03:00] Mailer in the novel *The Deer Park*, the novella called *The Man Who Studied Yoga*, and in sections of Mailer’s *Advertisements for Myself*, and in the published parts of his unfinished novel, *The Time of Her Time*. It may even be said that in these works I have cited, the attitude to sex is the major theme. Mailer sees sex as the last frontier, the single, meaningful experience left to man. More important, as the last remaining experience in which man can prove himself to be a man.

Images of war, of athletics, and images of the bullfight are constantly entwined by Mailer into detailed accounts of the sexual act. Victory and the proof of masculinity is defined by the outcome of the sexual battle. Victory depends on bringing [01:04:00] the female object to full orgasm. To Mailer, sex is combat. I said “female object,” and I meant just that. And this brings us to the next connection between de Kooning’s woman and the mass image of woman or the image of woman in mass culture that emerged in America in the 1950s, an image that rapidly spread abroad and attained its apotheosis and its most crystalline state in Federico Fellini’s La Dolce Vita. Here, Anita Ekberg, who was, of course, both a product and a cause of the new woman myth, is transformed by Fellini into a work of art. She is made to glorify and condemn her own image.

De Kooning’s image anticipates the actual realization of this image, just as the combative nature [01:05:00] of his painting anticipates the writings of Mailer and --

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Willem de Kooning / Maurice Tuchman, 1962/4/20. Reel-to-Reel collection. A0004. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Archives, New York