

Degree Zero: Drawing at Midcentury - extended labels

Jean Dubuffet. *Landscape (Paysage)*, 1951

Dick Higgins. *Graphis No. 82*, 1960

In the early 1950s, Dubuffet used the French word *graphismes* to describe the fluid scrawl of ink drawings like this one. At the end of the decade, Higgins began his *Graphis* series of drawings, which functioned as loose scripts for performances (termed "event scores" by Higgins and his peers in the Fluxus movement). This shared quality of "graphism"—a mode of mark-making that lies between language and art, and rhythmically records experience through gesture and line—was shared by a diverse set of artists working in different locations and affiliated with different movements at this midcentury moment.

Morita Yasuji. *The Wind Man*, c. 1953

Osawa Gakyū. *The Deep Pool*, c. 1953

Following a period in which calligraphy had been banned in Japanese schools by occupying Allied forces, Yasuji and Gakyū joined a generation of postwar artists in revolutionizing the centuries-old tradition by emphasizing the visual aspects of language. Intended to be seen as much as read, this so-called avant-garde calligraphy appealed more widely to an international audience. MoMA acquired these works on the occasion of its 1954 exhibition *Japanese Calligraphy*, whose press release described a "new abstract calligraphy" that sought "primarily to exploit the pictorial values of the written symbol, making legibility incidental."

Karel Appel. *Beast*, 1956

In this drawing, a kinetic tangle of inky marks describes a monstrous head. "You begin with nothing and end with nothing," Appel wrote, "but in the sum total of all those daubs in between nothing and nothing you sense a head or an expression, a sentiment." The Dutch artist likened this process to that of de Kooning, an American contemporary whom he visited in New York in 1957: "This is what I've always done: make a representation, and that is what De Kooning has always done and is still doing." Both Appel's *Beast* and de Kooning's *Seated Woman*, on view nearby, conjure figures even as they deface them through scratching or erasure.

Pierre Alechinsky. *Study for The Snowman ([Étude] L'Homme des neiges)*, 1956

"It is clear that cultures are becoming blurred today . . . they are secretly starting to put their finger on a common denominator, on a new image of the world." Born in Belgium and based in France by 1951, Alechinsky rejected the nationalism that often characterized postwar culture in favor of international exchange. He was a member of the CoBrA group—whose name is an abbreviation of Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam, its members' cities—and was the Paris correspondent for the Japanese journal *Bokubi* (Beauty of ink), which celebrated avant-garde interpretations of traditional calligraphy. Alechinsky executed this study the same year he traveled to Japan to make the film *Calligraphie japonaise*, which featured artists such as Osawa Gakyū (a work of whose is on view nearby).

Franz Kline. *Untitled II*, c. 1952

When asked in a 1962 interview if his work was influenced by Asian calligraphy, Kline denied the affinity: "People sometimes think I take a white canvas and paint a black sign on it, but this is not true. I paint the white as well as the black, and the white is just as important." However, in the early 1950s, Kline enjoyed an active relationship with members of the Japanese group Bokujinkai (People of the ink), whose avant-garde calligraphy journal *Bokubi* (Beauty of ink) featured a Kline painting on the cover of its inaugural issue. Kline's disavowal of their impact on his work can be attributed to the complex postwar political landscape, in which associating with Japan in the wake of its defeat undermined an allegiance to the virile American idiom of Abstract Expressionism.

Norman Lewis. *The Messenger*, 1952

In this drawing, Lewis exploits the properties of two different mediums to create a unique visual atmosphere, contrasting hazy passages of charcoal with precise figures in ink. "The whole thing in a sense became calligraphy," the artist explained of the so-called "little people" motif seen here, in which "everybody was going some goddamn place and nobody was going anywhere." Along with artists like David Smith and Mark Tobey, whose work is also on view in this exhibition, Lewis showed at New York's Marian Willard Gallery, which devoted exhibitions to traditional Japanese screens in addition to cutting-edge American art.

Jay DeFeo. *Untitled (Florence)*, 1952

"I think anyone would say that's where I started to become my own person as an artist," DeFeo recalled of Florence, Italy, where she participated in a fellowship early in her career, prior to settling in California's Bay Area. Visible in this drawing is a cruciform shape that evokes those omnipresent in Florence's churches, while the work's rough texture recalls the weathered walls of the city's centuries-old architecture.

Ellsworth Kelly. *Study for Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris*, 1949

"Everywhere I looked, everything I saw became something to be made, and it had to be exactly as it was, with nothing added," Kelly explained in 1949, declaring, "It was a new freedom: there was no need to compose." While living in Paris on the G.I. Bill, the artist visited the Musée d'art moderne, where the shape of a window captivated him more than the art on view, resulting in this drawing and a subsequent painting. The composition of *Study for "La Combe II"*, on view nearby, is similarly based on something he saw, this time in southern France: the play of shadows cast by a railing onto the stairs of a house.

Alfredo Volpi. *Geometric Composition*, c. 1957. *Composition with One Flag*, c. 1955–59

“You never know where the elements come from,” Volpi said, referring to the real-life sources that informed his seemingly abstract work. These drawings’ reduced forms represent two of his most recurrent motifs: a gridded window and a festival flag (*bandeirinha*) that speaks as much to local tradition as to a universal geometric language. Indeed, the self-taught artist’s elegant yet idiosyncratic repertory was enormously influential to the development of Brazilian modernism, a fact underscored by the provenance of these two works: they were previously owned by Willys de Castro, a key artist of the country’s Neo-Concrete movement, who is represented by a drawing on view nearby.

Georgia O’Keeffe. *Drawing X*, 1959

Made the same year she took a three-month trip around the world, this drawing was inspired by the aerial views of the landscape O’Keeffe witnessed from a plane. “The rivers actually seem to come up and hit you in the eye,” she recalled, insisting that “there’s nothing abstract about those pictures; they are what I saw—and very realistic to me.” This approach—adopting forms from life and simplifying them toward abstraction—is similar to the one taken by the younger Ellsworth Kelly (whose work is on view nearby), whom O’Keeffe admired. “I’ve actually looked at one of Kelly’s pictures and thought for a moment that I’d done it,” she once said.

Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar. *Black and White*, 1956

“My Expressionism died in Paris,” Ramírez Villamizar reflected about two extended visits he made to the French capital in the 1950s. “In that world made of calmness and reason . . . my figures flattened, they lost volume,” and the work—including this drawing, which he made during the second of those stays—“arrived at a great simplification.” Studying at the Atelier d’Art abstrait (Abstract art workshop)—alongside other international artists such as Ellsworth Kelly, whose work is on view nearby—Ramírez Villamizar became associated with *abstraction froide*—a geometric, “cold abstraction” that was pitted against the “hotter,” more lyrical *abstraction chaude* rising concurrently in Paris. Accordingly, a critic reviewing a 1956 New York exhibition of his work dubbed him “a Colombian with a ‘cool’ approach.”

Hércules Barsotti. *Drawing No. 1 (Desenho No. 1)*, 1958

Barsotti made this drawing the year he and his partner Willys de Castro (whose work is on view nearby) left São Paulo to travel throughout Europe. Previously associated with the rational geometry of Brazilian Concrete Art, they embraced Neo-Concrete Art—which stressed a greater connection between art and life—upon their return. The graphic dynamism of *Drawing No. 1*—in which an arrangement of triangles produces an illusion of curvature and depth—testifies to this approach. “Using a minimum of resources—working with a line or a plane, with white paper and black ink,” de Castro wrote of Barsotti’s drawings, “he communicates to us portions of the unsettled universe.”

Martín Ramírez. *Untitled (Alamentosa)*, c. 1953

Five decades before MoMA acquired its first Ramírez drawing, Tarmo Pasto, a professor of art and psychology who fostered the artist's practice at California's DeWitt State Hospital, brought Ramírez's work to the Museum's attention. "The fact that he is a non-communicative mental patient is beside the point in considering the validity of his art," Pasto wrote to MoMA's founding director Alfred H. Barr, Jr., in 1954, going on to praise the artist's "adeptness in handling," "meaningful symbolism," and "linear rhythm." Each of these qualities is visible in this monumental work, in which trains glide through horizontal and vertical tunnels.

Alfonso Ossorio. *Animulae*, 1950

"The point is that his operation repeats, on its small scale, the creation of the world," Dubuffet wrote about his friend Ossorio's technique. "He flings, at the outset, the chaotic and the inorganic upon his sheet of paper." In Paris in 1951, Ossorio rented a studio near that of Dubuffet, who, in addition to being an artist, was a major collector of so-called *art brut*—work by self-taught artists prized for its "raw" quality. After moving to Long Island in 1952, Ossorio stored Dubuffet's collection at his estate there, where friends from the Abstract Expressionist circle—including Jackson Pollock—would have seen it.

Uche Okeke. *Design for Iron Work I and Design for Iron Work II*, 1959

"Young artists in a new nation, that is what we are!" So proclaimed Okeke in 1960, the year Nigeria gained independence from British colonial rule. With fellow members of the Zaria Art Society, Okeke sought to create a "truly modern African art to be cherished and appreciated for its own sake." These drawings for ironwork adopt the lyrical curves of *uli* designs—traditionally practiced by the Igbo people of southern Nigeria in mural painting and body art—executing them with an imported pen and commercially produced paper instead of natural dyes.

Joong Seop Lee. *Family in Paradise (Number 50). Fairyland (Number 57). People Reading the Newspaper (Number 84)*, 1950–52

"He drew and drew amidst such a misery and managed to leave his footprints," the poet Goo Sang recalled of his friend Lee, who fled his native North Korea for the South when the Korean War broke out in 1950. "He drew, and drew, and drew while floating between Busan, Jeju Island, Tongyeong, Jinju, Daegu, and Seoul." During this period as a migrant refugee, the artist used the silver foil from cigarette packages as a support, scratching the surface with a sharp point and adding paint to the incisions. The resulting compositions—such as these dreamlike visions of abundance—are packed with figures, flora, and fauna.

Saul Steinberg. *Railway*, 1951

This poignant scene of a deserted railway station rendered purely in line reveals Steinberg's early training as an architect, which the Romanian-born artist received in Italy before emigrating to the United States. Though he worked in the realm of fine art, he is perhaps best known for his *New Yorker* cartoons, which he began contributing in 1941. While critics and audiences struggled with how to characterize Steinberg—commercial illustrator or serious draftsman—he tellingly described himself as “a writer who can't write . . . The line—let's call it graphology—is my real language.”

Beauford Delaney. *Untitled*, c. 1955

Delaney made this vibrant, textured pastel two years after he left New York for Paris, where he would remain for the rest of his life. This relocation—and the new freedoms it afforded a gay, Black artist—inspired a shift from figurative imagery toward abstraction. With its electric palette and densely layered structure of overlapping circles, this drawing reflects the energy Delaney felt in his new city; he wrote that he had “never seen such life and could not suppress an eagerness to join into this rhythm.”

Sonja Sekula. *The Voyage*, 1956

“Small size . . . suits my heart best,” Sekula wrote to her dealer Betty Parsons in 1956. “The American public must have bigness. OK. But I stick to my own need and prefer to work small scale.” The portable medium of drawing allowed the artist, who struggled with mental illness, to continue to work as she traveled back and forth between New York and her native Switzerland, where she received treatment. This transatlantic journey is alluded to in this work's title and in the ship that appears in one of its interior frames. Together, these jewel-toned zones suggest a sense of narrative, as one might find in the panes of a stained-glass window.

Sari Dienes. *Tomb*, c. 1953–54

“Placing a strip of paper over the carved face of the tombstone, Miss Dienes rubs the paper with an inked roller and in a few minutes has an accurate impression of the gravestone's pattern,” a 1954 *Life* magazine article described of the artist's method. But, rather than offering a faithful reproduction, Dienes used this technique as a “jumping of place for my imagination.” In *Tomb*, she departed from the initial transfer by adding an American flag—a found object laden with heightened meaning at the time of the Cold War and McCarthyism. Her use of this symbol likely influenced Jasper Johns, who helped her make rubbings of New York City grates and potholes around 1954, and whose own *Flag* drawing is on view nearby.

Brion Gysin. *A Trip from Here to There*, 1958

In the early 1950s, Gysin studied Japanese and Arabic calligraphy, both of which influenced this work. Adopting the horizontal format of a makimono—a Japanese scroll meant to be examined from right to left—*A Trip from Here to There* represents a journey the artist made through three locations in Morocco from 1954 to 1958. Gysin executed this work directly following that period at a writer's colony in the South of France. "I kept the makemono [sic] from May 1957 to Dec 1958 + looked at the blank pages almost daily," he wrote. "The first time I had a room big enough to work in was at La Ciotat + the makemono [sic] was completed in less than one hour."

Dick Higgins. *Graphis No. 19 (Act One of Saint Joan at Beaurevoir)*, 1959

In his "Notes on the *Graphis Series*," Higgins—an intermedia artist associated with the Fluxus movement—variously referred to these works as "notation," "drama," or "diagram." Existing as both drawings and as scores to be performed, they are at once graphic and choreographic, providing loose structure and unlimited possibility. They were first enacted by downtown New York's avantgarde circles—such as in the New School music composition class taught by the composer John Cage, whose own score is also in this case.

Yayoi Kusama. *Infinity Nets*, 1951. *Accumulation*, 1952

The early 1950s—a period when Japan was under United States occupation—was a formative time for Kusama's practice. "During the dark days of the War," the artist recalled, "working with letter-size sheets of white paper, I had found my own unique method of expression: ink paintings featuring accumulations of tiny dots and pen drawings of endless and unbroken chains of graded cellular forms." According to Kusama, these formats—both of which are represented here—contemplate the infinity of the universe and the individual's place within it: a single dot among many.

Kenzo Okada. *Number 2A*, 1957

"The desolation of the end of the war threw of all embellishments at once and exposed the raw skin of things," Okada reflected in 1948, clarifying that "this is not a decline, to the contrary, it is a time of the throbbing of a new life force." For Okada, this sense of postwar revitalization coincided with his 1950 move from a Japan still occupied by Allied forces to a New York enchanted by Abstract Expressionism. He settled a block below that movement's Tenth Street nexus of galleries and studios, and soon adopted abstraction as well, infusing traditional Japanese brush painting techniques with the dynamism of a new time and place.

Tony Smith. *Untitled*, 1953–55

Smith made this drawing while living in Germany in the early 1950s, after working as an architect and before making the large-scale sculptures for which he is best known. Its tension between organic growth and underlying order—in which amoeba-like forms both suggest and defy an invisible grid—was one that persistently preoccupied the artist. In this spirit, his embrace of a concept he called “generation” had both scientific and spiritual associations; he wanted his work to be “arranged in a configuration that is geometrically indicative of a higher order.”

Saburo Murakami. *Work Painted by Throwing a Ball (Tōkyū kaiga)*, 1954

One of Murakami’s *Bōru* or “ball” paintings, this work’s title summarizes the action of its making: bouncing an ink-covered ball against a sheet of handmade *torinoko* or “egg paper.” Though he would later become associated with Japan’s Gutai group—which emphasized the body’s materiality through performance—he made this drawing as a member of the earlier Zero-kai (Zero group). Murakami, who chose the name, explained, “Zero means ‘nothing’: start with nothing, completely original, no artificial meaning.”

Otto Piene. *Untitled (Smoke Drawing)*, 1959

Piene began making his *Rauchbilder*, or “smoke drawings,” in 1959. His process involved setting up a mesh screen over a candle and placing a sheet of paper above so that “the smoke impressed the sheet with its vibration pattern.” The idea of burning something down in order to create something else was consistent with the philosophy of the ZERO group Piene had cofounded in Düsseldorf the previous year. “Zero is the incommensurable zone in which the old state turns into the new,” he explained.