

The Museum of Modern Art

DEGREE ZERO: DRAWING AT MIDCENTURY SHOWCASES APPROXIMATELY 100 DRAWINGS FROM 1948 THROUGH 1961 EXCLUSIVELY FROM MoMA'S COLLECTION

The Exhibition Highlights Connections between Artists Working Across Movements, Geographies, and Generations

NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 11, 2020 [Updated February 3, 2021]—The Museum of Modern Art announces *Degree Zero: Drawing at Midcentury*, an exhibition that will showcase approximately 100 drawings made between 1948 and 1961 exclusively from the Museum's collection, on view November 1, 2020 through June 5, 2021. *Degree Zero: Drawing at Midcentury* will look across movements, geographies, and generations to highlight connections between diverse artists who embraced drawing to forge a new visual language in the aftermath of World War II. Modest, immediate, and direct, drawing—to use a phrase that circulated among artists and writers during these years—was the ideal “degree zero” medium for this “degree zero” moment. Within this impulse common to artists from across the world, drawing took many forms, from the abstract to the figurative, the organic to the hard-edged. Whether in scrawled graffiti or looping calligraphy, featuring reduced geometry or recording movement via mark-making, these works share similar conceptual and material concerns that manifested specifically in the medium.

Taking a global approach, the exhibition will feature American artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Sari Dienes, Ellsworth Kelly, and Jackson Pollock; European artists including Karel Appel, Jean Dubuffet, Henri Matisse, and Sonja Sekula; Latin American artists including Hércules Barsotti, Raúl Milián, Eduardo Ramirez Villamizar, and Alfredo Volpi; and Asian artists such as Yayoi Kusama, Joong Seop Lee, Saburo Murakami, and Morita Yasuji. Nigerian artist Uche Okeke, whose drawing practice looks equally to Igbo tradition and Western modernism, will also have work featured for the first time since its acquisition by the Museum in 2015. *Degree Zero: Drawing at Midcentury* is organized by Samantha Friedman, Associate Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints.

The postwar “degree zero” attitude often manifested in a particular kind of mark-making—a graffiti-like scribbling, an elemental scratching—that is at the heart of what drawing is. In the early 1950s, Jean Dubuffet used the French word *graphismes* to describe his ink drawings, such as *Ties and Whys: Landscape with Figures* (July 1952). At the end of the decade, the Fluxus artist Dick Higgins began his Graphis series of score-like drawings, bookending a period devoted to this quality of *graphism*, which lies between language and art and rhythmically records impression and experience through gesture and line.

During these years, a complex conversation around calligraphic drawing arose at the nexus of American, European, and Asian practices, at a moment, following WWII, when national identity

was particularly freighted. A 1954 exhibition of Japanese calligraphy at MoMA reflected an interest in what the press release called “this new abstract calligraphy,” and the Museum acquired three drawings, including Morita Yasuji’s *The Wind Man* (c. 1953), which will be shown in *Degree Zero*. American artists like Franz Kline, David Smith, and Norman Lewis were heavily influenced by Japanese calligraphy, as reflected in their works *Untitled II* (c. 1952), *Untitled 13/3/59* (1959), and *The Messenger* (1952), respectively. Pierre Alechinsky, who’s *Study for The Snowman* (1956) is included, traveled to Japan and made a film called *Calligraphie japonaise* in 1956.

Though such modes of drawing are often associated with abstraction, their looping line was equally deployed in these years in service of figuration. Some examples by artists associated with CoBrA (*Untitled* [1950], by Asger Jorn) and Abstract Expressionism (*Seated Woman* [1953–54], by Willem de Kooning), simultaneously describe and efface the human figure through a graphic language. Different approaches to landscape are also represented: all-over fields of line that describe organic phenomena, as in Louise Bourgeois’s *Untitled* (1949); psychic topographies, as in Richard Pousette-Dart’s *Untitled* (1948); or fantastic depictions of man-made interventions, like Saul Steinberg’s train station in *Railway* (1951).

Drawing in these years was not solely characterized by an agitated line, and one of the critical conversations that emerged was between so-called “hot” and “cold” abstraction. Many of the artists who employed geometric abstraction saw that language as an opportunity to remake not just the individual but society as a whole. The development of this visual vocabulary—seen in works by Lygia Clark (*Study for Planes in Modulated Surface [Planos em superfície modulada]*, 1957), Ellsworth Kelly (*Study for “La Combe II,”* 1950), and Alfredo Volpi (*Geometric Composition*, c. 1957)—relied on a network of international exchange between Latin America, Paris, and New York.

This moment was also a complicated one politically and economically—between the Cold War and McCarthyism, the postwar economic boom and the rise of capitalism—and these social forces began to surface in drawings that apply the same sense of accumulative mark-making to images of the American flag, as in Sari Dienes’s *Tomb* (c. 1953–54) or Jasper Johns’s *Flag* (1955), or to representations of tangible or abstract commodities, including Domenico Gnoli’s *Loading Crates* (March 1959) and Chryssa’s *Drawing for Stock Page* (1959).

As the 1950s waned and the ‘60s dawned, the idea of performance became increasingly implicit within the act of drawing, for example in the actionism of Günter Brus (*Informel Drawing*, 1960), the gesturalism of Hans Hartung (*Untitled*, 1960), or the smoke drawings of Otto Piene—who cofounded the aptly named Group ZERO—made by lighting paper on fire and drawing with the resulting soot. Less vigorously, perhaps, but no less performatively, the role of drawing as a score developed at this moment, thanks to the contributions of Merce Cunningham (*Suite by Chance [Movement Chart II C-D-E Extensions]*, 1952) and John Cage (*Page 18, Solo for Piano*, from *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*, 1958), and Fluxus-affiliated artists like Toshi Ichiyanagi (*Music for Electric Metronome*, 1960).

Throughout the exhibition, connections will be drawn between artists of different generations—for example, the Abstract Expressionist response to Henri Matisse’s fluid ink drawings from the early 1950s, or the written correspondence between Georgia O’Keeffe and Yayoi Kusama—emphasizing that this long decade transcended a single movement, just as it was not exclusively a period about painting. The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre’s attitude, writing about Alberto Giacometti in 1948, that “we have to start again from scratch,” was still relevant to the young New York-based Claes Oldenburg in 1961, when he declared himself “for an art that grows up not knowing it is art at all, an art given the chance of having a starting point of zero.”

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