



# American Masters

Six Artists from the Permanent Collection of the  
Whitney Museum of American Art

The exhibition was organized by Kathleen Monaghan, branch director, Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center, with the assistance of Kathryn Kanjo, manager, who wrote the artists' biographies. Special thanks are extended to Jennifer Landes, gallery assistant, and, for research assistance, Lisa Steinberg, intern.

*Front cover*

Arshile Gorky, *The Artist and His Mother*, c. 1926–36

*Back cover*

Louise Bourgeois, *Quarantania*, 1941

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945 Madison Avenue  
New York, New York 10021

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Arshile Gorky

Louise Bourgeois

Adolph Gottlieb

Isamu Noguchi

Franz Kline

David Smith

Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center

January 10–March 18, 1992

Whitney Museum of American Art at Champion

April 17–June 17, 1992

**The Whitney Museum of American Art** evolved from the highly personal and somewhat idiosyncratic vision of one woman—Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1877–1942). A writer, collector, and sculptor, Mrs. Whitney felt that the “official recognition” of an artist often came too late—only after an artist’s reputation was well established. Beginning in 1914, with a determined view toward the future and a commitment to living, often less well-known American artists, Mrs. Whitney founded a series of exhibition galleries. These eclectic galleries were forerunners of the Whitney Museum of American Art, which opened in 1931. In sixty years the Permanent Collection has grown to include more than 10,000 works of art. The Museum’s holdings vigorously illustrate decades of change—the fast-paced innovations of twentieth-century American art as well as developments in the way individual artists work.

“American Masters” presents an overview of six artists to whom the Whitney has shown the kind of continued commitment advocated by Mrs. Whitney: three sculptors—Louise Bourgeois, Isamu Noguchi, and David Smith; and three painters—Arshile Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, and Franz Kline. Generally, group exhibitions are centered on a specific theme or formal art historical issue and often include only a single work by each artist. The strength and depth of the Whitney Museum’s collection, however, offers us an opportunity to look at a number of works by the same artist done over several decades and to make comparisons among them. Works are placed together in the gallery to suggest affinities or perhaps reveal previously overlooked connections, for each time a work is situated in a new context the viewer’s response changes. And while it is not the purpose of this exhibition to draw strict parallels, associations among seemingly disparate works do emerge as we observe the struggles and the interpretations of each artist.

The painters Gorky, Gottlieb, and Kline are classified as Abstract Expressionists or New York School artists. The sculptors Bourgeois, Noguchi, and Smith, although working in the same time period, are less apt to be characterized in terms of a particular movement, doctrine, or school. All the artists were either born or trained in Europe and strongly influenced by both Cubism and Surrealism. As such, they are representative of a larger company of artists for whom expressive abstraction was a lifetime preoccupation.

The extraordinary, compelling style of each artist is easily distinguished. Yet when we compare individual works to the larger group, similar resolutions are evident. With a subjective approach that emphasizes both powerful form

and spontaneity, these artists tend to reduce specific detail of representation in favor of suggestion and allusion. As they strive to bridge the gap between image and abstraction, they often rely on sensuous surface and expressive line. This process of discovery, of developing an artistic vocabulary, is perhaps more easily discerned in the drawings, where the immediacy of personal gesture seems more intimate.

All the works in the exhibition reverberate with an inventiveness that synthesizes delicate symmetry and strength. More subtle affinities are revealed, however, through the installation, which pairs sculptors with painters: Louise Bourgeois with Arshile Gorky, Isamu Noguchi with Adolph Gottlieb, and David Smith with Franz Kline. Franz Kline's bold brushwork and isolated forms echo the surface treatment and discrete elements found in David Smith's sculptures. Smith's solid, structural shapes are poetically balanced in space—as are Kline's brushstrokes, though they are produced entirely by gesture on the flat surface of the canvas. Equally potent, though less aggressive, forms exist in the works of Adolph Gottlieb and Isamu Noguchi, who rely on the implication of myth or universal symbol to bring meaning to their work. Smooth skin and interlocking shapes delineate the formal elements of Noguchi's sculptures. Gottlieb introduces broad fields of color countered by sequestered areas of mass and, like Noguchi, restrains the tension within this reductive form. The dark outlines joined to lush, opulent surfaces in Arshile Gorky's paintings yield a sense of hermetic containment that corresponds to the quasi-anthropomorphic forms in the sculptures of Louise Bourgeois, where individual elements simultaneously appear to be segregated yet part of a whole.

While all six artists rely on organic form, tactile surface, and the connotation of impulsive response, there remains an underlying, defined structure in their works. These complex creations simultaneously balance refined lyricism, enduring strength, and the willful passion so evident in any art we call masterful.

—Kathleen Monaghan

## Arshile Gorky

(1904–1948)

Born Vosdanik Adoian to an Armenian peasant family, Arshile Gorky immigrated to the United States in 1920, following his mother's death. In 1922, he enrolled in Boston's New School of Design. After returning to New York in 1924, he briefly studied at the National Academy of Design and then the Grand Central Art School, where he subsequently became a member of the faculty.

Gorky found visual inspiration in the museums of Boston and New York. His work during the twenties reveals direct influences of Cézanne, Gauguin, and Matisse: form is built from patches of color, backgrounds are reduced and stylized, shapes are demarcated with heavy black contours. Such adherence to the styles of other artists led some to label him an imitator during this period. Yet he firmly believed that learning the past language of art was the correct path to creating its future. He gathered further inspiration from the Cubism of Picasso and Braque and the Surrealism of Max Ernst and Giorgio de Chirico. In the 1940s, Gorky finally won an independent place for himself in the art world by creating a bridge between Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. His semi-figurative abstractions hover on the verge of recognition: in *The Betrothal, II* (1947), rubbed, thinned paint exposes successive layers contained within a flowing draftsman's line.

Despite differences in style, certain motifs recur throughout Gorky's art in a personal, visual lexicon. His wandering black line appears in varying forms—as a synthesizing contour in *Painting* (1936–37) or as a trace of his automatic mark making. Likewise, the pinched ovals common to his abstract paintings of the 1940s occur as well in works of the thirties, where they suggest a pelvis or an artist's palette. Also found throughout his oeuvre is the distinct shape of the Armenian slippers he wears in *The Artist and His Mother* (c. 1926–36).

In January 1946, a studio fire destroyed most of Gorky's work; the following month he underwent surgery for cancer. For the next two years, despite these obstacles, or perhaps because of them, Gorky's artistic output flourished. In 1948, however, he was in a serious car accident, which left his painting arm permanently paralyzed. Gorky took his own life on July 21, 1948.



## Louise Bourgeois

(b. 1911)

Born in Paris, Louise Bourgeois first studied mathematics at the Sorbonne, but soon abandoned the field for art. She enrolled at the École des Beaux-Arts for a brief, academic training, and then continued her studies in the ateliers, including the Académie Ranson, Académie Julian, and Académie de la Grande Chaumière. After immigrating to the United States in 1938, she took classes at the Art Students League in New York. Through the 1940s, Bourgeois primarily produced and exhibited paintings.

The sculpture for which Bourgeois is best known today has always resisted classification within a single movement or style. Her three-dimensional studies of biomorphic forms hover between abstraction and representation. In media such as wood, bronze, plaster, and latex, her approach is individual, her forms organic. The human experience is paramount to Bourgeois, and she often cites her turbulent childhood as an impetus for her work. Her sculptural debut in the late 1940s featured totemlike, wooden, figural abstractions such as *Quarantania* (1941). *One and Others* (1955) can be grouped with Bourgeois' other painted and stained-wood sculptures of the period, but it also identifies a recurring theme in her oeuvre—that of the part to the whole, the self to society. In *One and Others*, faceless, wooden presences are silently bound in a mutual venture, estranged from yet connected to one another.

These human surrogates become further objectified in Bourgeois' later work. From the 1970s to the present, she has been creating isolated human and animal forms which, like classical sculpture fragments, are extracted from their original contexts. In *Nature Study* (1984), Bourgeois combines these various parts into a new whole. Male and female, human and animal traits conjoin in this single, faceless assemblage, which establishes similarities by uniting differences.



## Adolph Gottlieb

(1903–1974)

Adolph Gottlieb began his art training at the Art Students League in New York in 1920. He then made a yearlong trip to France and Germany, where he explored European modernism first-hand. Upon his return to the United States in 1922, however, he continued to work in the gritty, realistic style of his teacher, John Sloan.

In the 1930s, Gottlieb became increasingly interested in abstraction, and by the next decade his work included elements influenced by primitive and mythic symbols. Many artists, including Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock, were turning to myth for its timeless relevance and universality. The Pictographs, a series of paintings Gottlieb completed between 1941 and 1951, including *Voyager's Return* (1946) and *Vigil* (1948), present such cryptic symbols arranged in cell-like grids. Compartmentalized and diagrammatic, Gottlieb's repository of signs eludes a direct literary signification and instead permits viewers to create their own meaning.

In the 1950s, Gottlieb's works became increasingly abstract. His Imaginary Landscapes (1951–57), such as *The Frozen Sounds, Number 1* (1951), fracture the picture plane with a strong horizontal line, establishing a duality between the upper and lower regions—between the astral and the earthbound. The paintings in the subsequent Bursts series (1957–74) not only omit mythic references completely, but also eliminate the horizon line. As in *The Crest* (1959), hovering orbs now float above a tangle of choppy brushstrokes on an uninterrupted plane of monochromatic color. Painting on a monumental scale typical of the Abstract Expressionists, Gottlieb sought to confront the viewer with immediate, non-objective imagery. Despite the lack of references, the works prompt dualistic readings of containment and release, mass and space, logic and irrationality.





## Isamu Noguchi

(1904–1988)

Born in California to a Japanese father and an American mother, Isamu Noguchi spent his childhood in Japan. He attended high school in the United States and briefly worked as an assistant to sculptor Gutzon Borglum. Discouraged by Borglum, Noguchi did a brief stint in premedical studies. In 1924 he resumed his art training and received Guggenheim Fellowships to Paris in 1927 and 1928.

In Europe, Noguchi apprenticed to Constantin Brancusi, who encouraged the young artist to experiment with abstraction. Working in stone, bronze, wood, and ceramics, Noguchi not only sculpted but also created furniture, environments, and set designs. His sculptural process is a deductive journey that simultaneously explores the immobility and variability of mass. He described his work as “a preoccupation with impalpable voids and pressures, the punctuation of spaces.”

Exploring personal space in his studio sculpture, public space in his outdoor environments, and domestic space in his furniture design, Noguchi confounded viewers with the diversity of form and material in his work. His blending of American, Japanese, and European sensibilities yielded sculpture which was often out of step with current art vogues. Flattened, interlocking, biomorphic shapes such as those in *Humpty Dumpty* (1946) recall Arp and Miró, while their polish and clarity stand in direct contrast to the rugged, gestural tenor of Abstract Expressionism. Unlike contemporaneous vanguard sculpture, *Integral* (1959) is carved rather than welded and emphasizes containment rather than expansion. Noguchi’s art encompasses his varied interests in ancient cultures, dance, science, and poetry; and as it defies stylistic classification, it asserts the individual.

*Humpty Dumpty*, 1946

## Franz Kline

(1910–1962)

Born in Pennsylvania, Franz Kline attended Boston University and enrolled in classes at the Boston Art Students League. In 1935, he attended the Heatherley School of Art in London, studying Daumier, Blake, Goya, and Japanese prints. Three years later, he settled in New York, where he initially created realistic street scenes, murals, and portraits.

By the late 1940s, these works gave way to increasingly abstract compositions. Kline made numerous preliminary drawings on the pages of telephone books and would then translate sections of these sketches into paintings. With the help of a Bell-Opticon projector, loaned to him by Willem de Kooning in 1949, he enlarged details of his studies into painterly gestures of broad, architectonic strokes. Although these monochromatic abstractions are often referred to as calligraphic, Kline's intention was "to set up a conflict between the white and the black," painting not a gesture on a ground, but an activated field of related marks. All space is positive, and black and white strokes together reveal principles of balance and structure; the black traverses and interlocked, white planes in *Mahoning* (1956) typify this approach.

Using wide housepainter's brushes and quick-drying enamel paints, Kline achieved a spontaneous effect, despite his continual reworking of the surface. He described having "finally arrived at black and white by painting the color out." Yet by the mid-1950s he was ready to paint the color back in, on his own terms. During the last five years of his life, he permitted color to expand his structural explorations, as in *Dahlia* (1959), where sliding planes of rich burgundies, reds, and blues vie for prominence against Kline's familiar black gestures.



*Dahlia*, 1959



## David Smith

(1906–1965)

David Smith, born in Indiana in 1906, began his art training in high school, taking correspondence drawing classes from the Cleveland Art School. He continued his education at Ohio University in Athens. Arriving in New York in 1926, he met Arshile Gorky and John Graham and enrolled in classes at the Art Students League. Although he considered himself a painter well into the 1950s, he began making sculpture in the early 1930s. Utilizing skills learned while working at an Indiana Studebaker plant, he introduced welding to his sculpture in 1932.

Inspired by the welded metal sculptures of Picasso and Julio González and interested in breaking free of sculpture's conventional, monolithic approach, Smith converted volumetric mass into a spatial environment by locking metal segments into linear compositions. Later, using more traditional casting methods and recognizable symbolism, Smith produced biting social commentaries in the *Medals for Dishonor* series (1937–40). This foreshadowed his return to more conventional representation and methods of casting in the mid-forties. By the early fifties, however, his sculptures were again open, linear "drawings in air." Their serpentine forms and welded contours suggest volume without mass. Read frontally on a vertical plane, they naturally relate to painting. *Hudson River Landscape* (1951) typifies this approach, in which dominating horizontals and undulating curves promote the scenic title. These works were followed by various series of upright, planar, anthropomorphic sculptures: *Agrícolas*, *Tanktotems*, and the *Sentinels*. *Running Daughter* (1956) blithely suggests the figure and successfully freezes movement within a balance of arcing forms.

During the 1960s, Smith was occupied with the *Voltri* and *Cubi* series. While the *Voltris* continued to employ pieces of found metal, a practice he had begun in the 1930s, in the *Cubi* Smith introduced burnished stainless steel. Although less volumetric than the typical *Cubi*, *Lectern Sentinel* (1961), with its stacked height of angled, geometric planes, is an early example of this series, on which he worked until his death in 1965.

*Lectern Sentinel*, 1961

## Works in the Exhibition

Unless otherwise indicated, all works are from the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth. Sight refers to measurements taken within the frame or mat opening.

### Louise Bourgeois (b. 1911)

#### *Quarantania*, 1941

Seven wood elements on a wood base,  
84¼ × 31¼ × 29¼  
Gift of an anonymous donor 77.80

#### *Untitled*, 1946

Ink and gouache on paper, 24½ × 18⅞  
Purchase, with funds from the Mr. and Mrs.  
Isidore M. Cohen Purchase Fund 85.73

#### *Untitled*, 1950

Ink on paper, 11 × 8½  
Robert Miller Gallery, New York

#### *One and Others*, 1955

Painted and stained wood, 18½ × 20 × 16¼  
Purchase 56.43

#### *Nature Study*, 1984

Bronze, 30 × 14½ × 19  
Purchase, with funds from the Painting and  
Sculpture Committee 84.42

#### *Nature Study, White Eyes*, 1986

Gray and white marble with steel base,  
30 × 33½ × 32  
Robert Miller Gallery, New York

#### *Untitled*, 1988

Watercolor and graphite on paper, 11¼ × 9  
Robert Miller Gallery, New York

### Arshile Gorky (1904–1948)

#### *The Artist and His Mother*, c. 1926–36

Oil on canvas, 60 × 50  
Gift of Julien Levy for Maro and Natasha Gorky  
in memory of their father 50.17

#### *Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia*, c. 1931–32

Ink on paper, 24 × 31  
50th Anniversary Gift of Mr. and Mrs.  
Edwin A. Bergman 80.54

#### *Painting*, 1936–37

Oil on canvas, 38 × 48  
Purchase 37.39

#### *Study for Mechanics of Flying*, Newark Airport

Aviation Murals, c. 1936  
Gouache on paper, 13¼ × 16½ (sight)  
50th Anniversary Gift of Alan H. Temple 80.16

#### *Portrait of Bart van der Schelling*, c. 1939

Ink on paper napkin, 15⅞ × 13 (sight)  
Gift of Dr. Aron Krich 79.48

#### *Study for Summation*, 1946

Graphite and crayon on paper, 19⅞ × 25½  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Wolfgang S. Schwabacher  
50.18

#### *The Betrothal, II*, 1947

Oil on canvas, 50¾ × 38  
Purchase 50.3

### Adolph Gottlieb (1903–1974)

#### *The Centers of Lateral Resistance*, 1945

Gouache on paper, 32 × 24  
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum,  
New York  
(Champion only)

#### *Voyager's Return*, 1946

Watercolor and gouache on paper,  
25½ × 19⅞ (sight)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel M. Kootz 51.38  
(Equitable only)

#### *Untitled*, c. 1947–48

Gouache and sgraffito on paper, 24 × 18  
© 1979 Adolph & Esther Gottlieb Foundation, Inc.  
(Champion only)

#### *Vigil*, 1948

Oil on canvas, 36 × 48  
Purchase 49.2  
(Equitable only)

#### *The Frozen Sounds, Number 1*, 1951

Oil on canvas, 36 × 48  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel M. Kootz 57.3

#### *Unstill Life*, 1952

Oil on canvas, 36 × 48  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Jaretzki, Jr. 56.25

#### *The Crest*, 1959

Oil on canvas, 108¼ × 80¼  
Gift of The Chase Manhattan Bank 66.89

**Franz Kline (1910–1962)**

*Untitled #4*, c. 1935

Graphite on paper,  $16\frac{1}{4} \times 13\frac{1}{4}$   
Purchase, with funds from the  
Drawing Committee 85.5

*Composition*, 1955

Oil and gouache on paper,  $10\frac{3}{8} \times 13$   
Gift of Frances and Sydney Lewis 77.35

*Mahoning*, 1956

Oil and paper collage on canvas,  $80 \times 100$   
Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the  
Whitney Museum of American Art 57.10

*Dahlia*, 1959

Oil on canvas,  $82 \times 67$   
Purchase, with funds from an anonymous  
group of friends of the Whitney Museum of  
American Art 66.90

*Untitled*, 1960

Ink on paper,  $8\frac{1}{2} \times 10\frac{1}{2}$   
Purchase, with funds from Mr. and Mrs.  
Benjamin Weiss 78.53

*Red Painting*, 1961

Oil on canvas,  $110 \times 78\frac{1}{4}$   
Sidney Janis Gallery, New York

**Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988)**

*Work Sheets for Sculpture*, 1945

Graphite on graph paper with cutouts,  $17 \times 22$   
Purchase, with funds from the Howard and  
Jean Lipman Foundation, Inc. 74.46

*Humpty Dumpty*, 1946

Ribbon slate,  $58\frac{3}{4}$  high  
Purchase 47.7

*Night Land*, 1947

Marble,  $22 \times 47 \times 37\frac{1}{2}$   
The Pace Gallery, New York  
(Equitable only)

*Endless Coupling*, 1957

Iron, 96 high  
Gift of Howard and Jean Lipman 78.72  
(Equitable only)

*Integral*, 1959

Marble,  $49\frac{1}{4}$  high  
Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the  
Whitney Museum of American Art 60.25

**David Smith (1906–1965)**

*Untitled*, c. 1937–38

Ink, pastel, and wash on paper,  $17 \times 22$   
Purchase, with funds from Joel and  
Anne Ehrenkranz 79.46

*Cockfight—Variation*, 1945

Steel,  $34\frac{1}{4} \times 16\frac{3}{4} \times 9\frac{1}{2}$   
Purchase 46.9

*Untitled*, 1946

Tempera on paper,  $22 \times 30\frac{1}{4}$   
Purchase, with funds from The Lauder  
Foundation—Drawing Fund 79.45

*Hudson River Landscape*, 1951

Welded steel,  $49\frac{1}{2} \times 75 \times 16\frac{3}{4}$   
Purchase 54.14

*Untitled*, 1951

Ink and tempera on paper,  $19\frac{3}{4} \times 25\frac{3}{4}$   
Promised 50th Anniversary Gift of an anonymous  
donor P.7.79

*Running Daughter*, 1956

Painted steel,  $100\frac{1}{2} \times 36 \times 17$   
50th Anniversary Gift of Mr. and Mrs.  
Oscar Kolin 81.42

*Lonesome Man*, 1957

Silver,  $28 \times 9\frac{1}{2} \times 4\frac{1}{2}$   
Collection of Candida and Rebecca Smith  
(Champion only)

*Lectern Sentinel*, 1961

Stainless steel,  $101\frac{3}{4} \times 33 \times 20\frac{1}{2}$   
Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the  
Whitney Museum of American Art 62.15  
(Equitable only)

*Untitled (Figure Drawing)*, 1963

Oil on paper,  $26 \times 20$   
Gift of Howard and Jean Lipman 75.29



Whitney Museum of American Art  
at Equitable Center  
787 Seventh Avenue at 52nd Street  
New York, New York 10019  
(212) 554-1113

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Tuesday–Friday, 12:30 and 2:30 pm  
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Archival Color (Gorky, *Painting*); Geoffrey  
Clements (Gorky, *The Artist and His Mother*);  
Bill Jacobson Studio (Kline, *Dahlia*); Robert E.  
Mates Studio (Gottlieb, *Vigil*); Jerry L. Thompson  
(Bourgeois, *One and Others, Quarantania*;  
Noguchi, *Humpty Dumpty*; Smith, *Lectern Sentinel*)

*Design*

Katy Homans

*Typesetting*

Trufont Typographers, Inc.

*Printing*

Eastern Press

