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A NEW LOOK AT AMERICAN MODERNISM

Long-neglected artists are being rediscovered as the art world realizes that the modernist triumph was more than the work of a few big names. By Edward M. Gomez

What goes around comes around, and in art, what comes up for reassessment years after its original appearance may benefit from the broader critical perspective that comes with time. So it is that in galleries, museums, artists' studios, and college classrooms, American modernism—that ambitious outpouring of creativity from the early years of the 20th century through the paint-throwing explosion of abstract expressionism after World War II—is flourishing again. It is, some might argue, enjoying the attention it never received the first time around.

But the art being reconsidered is not so much that of the well-documented American modernist pioneers, such as Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, Georgia O'Keeffe, or John Marin. Nor does the current reappraisal focus on the abstract expressionist headliners of three or four decades later, like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman of the so-called New York school, whose booze-fueled, myth-evoking probings in paint have become the emblems of an era—and all-but-untouchable auction artifacts.

Instead, the rising tide of interest centers on the contributions of lesser-known artists from American modernism's second phase (roughly 1927 to 1944), such as Burgoyne Diller, Stuart Davis, Charles Shaw, Ilya Bolotowsky, Gertrude Greene, and George L.K. Morris, among others. In modernism's third and most famous phase, the New York school years from the mid-1940s through the '50s, this revisionist art history, as its practitioners call it, is re-evaluating the work of William Baziotes, Norman Lewis, Peter Busa, Lee Krasner,

Painter Emil Bisttram (above) and his Untitled Abstraction *(left), shown at dealer Gary Snyder's "1937" exhibition in New York.*

Philip Guston, Ethel Schwabacher, and their contemporaries.

For various reasons that are also coming under scrutiny, these artists were not stars in their own time. Nonetheless, the curators, historians, and art dealers who are now working to deepen our understanding of American modernism emphasize that these artists' ideas and accomplishments played vital roles in shaping the creative environments that nurtured the styles and reputations of their more celebrated confrères.

"America has long embraced a star system backed by the myth of the rugged individualist," notes Sandra Kraskin, director of the Sidney Mishkin Gallery at Baruch College in New York. "This attitude," she continues, "has influenced the way modern art history has been written."

In 1994, Kraskin organized "Reclaiming Artists of the New York School: Toward a More Inclusive View of the 1950s," a ground-breaking exhibition showcasing twenty-eight lesser-known painters and sculptors who were working in brushy, gestural, texture-rich or form-expanding modes at the same time as luminaries like Pollock and de Kooning.

Ilya Bolotowsky in 1938 (above) and his 1935 Biomorphic Constructivist Composition *in oil and graphite on paper (top).*

"Abstract expressionism was a large movement," Kraskin explains, "but you wouldn't know it from the short list of big names we hear about. Other painters, such as James Brooks, Peter Busa, Perle Fine, Elaine de Kooning, or Norman Lewis, and sculptors like Ibram Lassaw—whose mid–1930s work anticipated Pollock's famous drip paintings a decade later—made contributions that shouldn't be forgotten." Kraskin believes that "expanding the pantheon" of the most important abstract expressionists would actually "make the case stronger for the appreciation of this powerful American art of the mid-century."

Ann Gibson, a professor at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, notes that there has been a varied reaction to such efforts to "recast the canon" of American mod-

ernism. For example, Gibson has brought forward the work of Norman Lewis, a black American painter who was active in New York school–era artists' discussion groups but whose own exploration of abstract expressionist issues and techniques often incorporated African-derived subject matter. Despite the power of his painting, today Lewis remains overlooked.

"Was Lewis rejected because he was black?" Gibson asks. "Well, yes and no." In a still-segregated postwar America, she explains, "white artists were conflicted about the politics that his very presence evoked." What's more, she adds, Lewis's "broad and inconsistent stylistic range and his African-American identity were alien to the image of abstract expressionism," with its emphasis on an intellectual freedom without culture-specific iconography like Lewis's jazz musicians or Harlem scenes.

> America's myth of rugged individualism has profoundly influenced the way modern art history has been written.

Not surprisingly, some art professionals assume that if lesser-known artists were any good, they would have become famous by now. But Gibson, author of the forthcoming *Towards a Cultural History of Abstract Expressionism* (Yale University Press), explains that, unlike older art experts whose reputations are invested in the status quo, younger scholars and curators "have acquired the intellectual equipment to deal with this new research." She points out that art professionals who are themselves members of the groups that have come under renewed critical attention—women, African-Americans, Latinos, or gays and lesbians, for example—are more apt to embrace the findings of today's revisionist art history.

"The fact is that some deserving artists have slipped through the cracks," observes the self-styled "revisionist art dealer" Gary Snyder, whose five-year-old Manhattan gallery is devoted to American modernism from the 1920s through the 1950s. "But collectors are rediscovering them," he says, "thanks to a renewed interest in the search for the new and in the breakthrough to abstract expressionism that the history of American modernism represents. It's an exciting story."

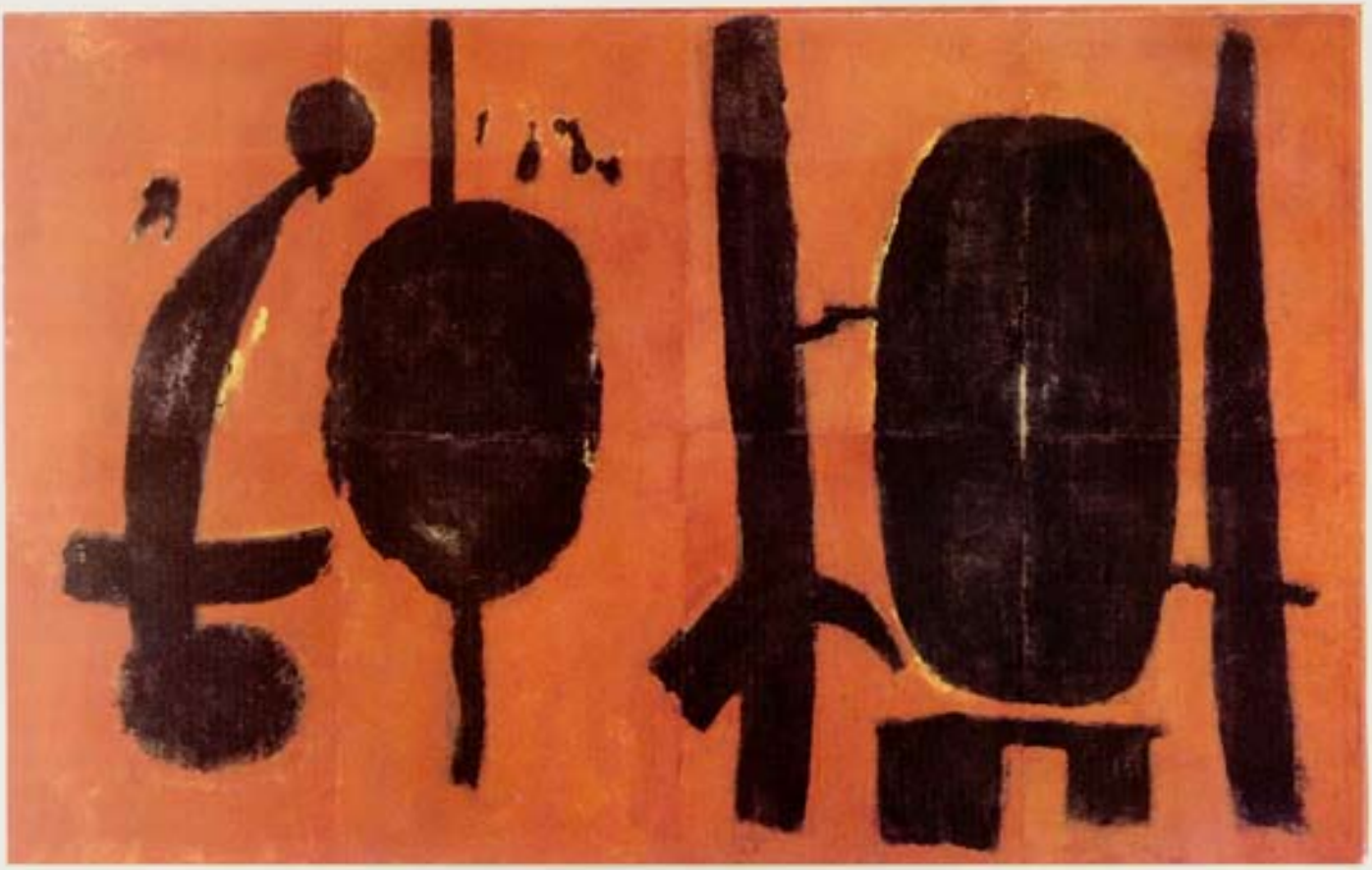
Snyder began the current exhibition season with "1937," a show commemorating the year in which the New York–based American Abstract Artists group mounted its first public presentation. Snyder rounded up actual pieces from that historic event, including Charles Biederman's *Work No. 4*, an architectonic sculpture-as-painting of lacquered blue, yellow, and black wood, and Charles Shaw's painting-as-sculpture, oil-on-wood *Plastic Polygon*, whose cutout, stair-stepped shape and perspective evoke Manhattan's jagged skyline.

If works like these presaged the minimalist aesthetic that would emerge decades later, others by such artists as Emil Bisttram, Giorgio Cavallon, Werner Drewes, Balcomb Greene, George L.K. Morris, Esphyr Slobodkina, and Ilya Bolotowsky paved the way for the post-war move toward freewheeling, gesture-conscious abstract expressionism. These painters spent years sputtering toward the modern, wrestling with the lingering legacies of European-born cubism and surrealism; in recent months, five New York galleries, including Snyder's, have mounted shows of their work. Prominent among the dealers was Beacon Hill Fine Art, which offered a number of paintings from the important Penny and Elton Yasuna collection of American modernist art.

Norman Lewis, whose 1962 painting Bonfire *is shown above, may have been "rejected" by the New York school painters partly because his work often relied on ideas and themes drawn from African-American experience.*

Sometimes difficult and earnest, but often tightly composed with a keen sense of color, texture, and design, these works of the 1920s and 1930s offer today's viewers a determined display of theory in action. They encompass a vast range of styles, from George L.K. Morris's cubist-based structural abstraction to Burgoyne Diller's rectilinear, Mondrian-derived neoplasticism. Over the years, a single artist's work could vary widely too; consider the Russian-born Ilya Bolotowsky's playful surrealist canvases and his much harder-edged angular geometries.

Susan C. Larsen, who, with John R. Lane, organized the landmark exhibition "Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America 1927–1944" for the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh in 1983, has written that "This period ... is characterized by a restless spirit of exploration and analysis and a desire to learn from the abstract art of Europe but to consider it as a basic



language capable of expressing the content and style of modern American life."

Regional museums, less preoccupied with blockbuster shows than their big-city counterparts, have also played a leading role in presenting American modernist art in a new light. Among the issues of special interest to curators is how deeply American some of the sources that influenced this new art were.

"From the precisionists at the beginning of this century through the Indian space painters in the '40s, American modernists were striving to reach a spiritual point in their work," explains curator Gail Stavitsky of the Montclair Art Museum in Montclair, New Jersey. Stavitsky recently co-organized "Affinities and Influences: Native American Art and American Modernism," a show that examined the efforts of "Indian space" artists like Steve Wheeler, Jay Van Everen, Will Barnet, and Peter Busa to combine aspects of European-derived modernism with the symbol-filled interlocking unity of figure and ground in Native American art.

"Working through cubism and the figure-ground relationship were issues associated with abstract expressionism," Stavitsky says, "but the Indian space painters were working them out before the abstract expressionists." Ultimately, this experimentation would lead to the all-over covering of canvases by the "action painters" of the New York school.

The reclusive Sam Glankoff in 1981 (above) and his untitled 1980 work in printer's ink and casein on handmade Japanese paper (top).

Museums, too, have explored other aspects of American modernism; in 1986 the Los Angeles County Museum of Art presented "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985," in which American work figured prominently, and in 1990 the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, offered "Abstract Expressionism: Other Dimensions." That milestone show, organized by chief curator Jeffrey Wechsler, demonstrated that many of the painterly concerns that abstract expressionist artists had addressed in their classic large-scale works had been at issue in their lesser-known small works on canvas or paper as well. The show also argued for greater recognition of less prominent artists like Edward Corbett, Harold Shapinsky, and Ethel Schwabacher.

But is there room for more great modernists? "I know that art history is a matter of editing, of knowing where to stop," Wechsler admits. "But when you start looking in new directions, you realize that the 'canon' is still relatively new."

Perhaps abstract expressionism did not simply "erupt" in the 1940s, and the accomplishments of its leading artists should be viewed with less starstruck awe and more as a product of history.

Then there's the tougher task of reorienting the established critical perspective on how and why modernism—and abstract expressionism in particular—emerged at all. In his 1991 book *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (Cambridge University Press), Stephen Polcari proposes that the movement did not just "erupt" in the late 1940s and that its leaders' accomplishments should be regarded with less starstruck awe. Rather, Polcari argues, their work was very much about "historical, cultural, and social questions" of their time and that it "has continuities with and is in some ways analogous to American art of the 1930s."

Meanwhile, whole bodies of remarkable work have remained relatively unknown for decades. Consider Sam Glankoff's unusual and prolific output of woodcuts and large multi-paneled paintings on Japanese paper. Dealer Gary Snyder now represents this enigmatic artist, who died in 1982, only a few months after his first solo gallery exhibition at the age of eighty-seven. Glankoff lived and worked outside the mainstream through all the major periods of American modernism. He had participated only reluctantly in Whitney Studio Club shows during the 1920s, and after 1928 he chose not to exhibit his work at all.

"As a young man, he had been a conscientious objector in World War I and had fled to Cuba," explains Wendy Snyder, the archivist of Glankoff's estate (and no relation to Gary Snyder). "In those days, had this been discovered, Sam would have been publicly ostracized." This fact, along with Glankoff's own reclusiveness, helped obscure his art to all but a few close associates until after his death. Today it is coming to light and finding a unique place at the center of the tradition of gestural abstraction.

Cubist-influenced painter George L.K. Morris (1905–75, above) and his Abstraction *(left), a 1935 work in pastel on artist's board.*

Artists of all levels of renown have benefited from the new art history. Joan Mitchell, who died in France in 1992 at the age of sixty-six, has been called a second-generation abstract expressionist. Fourteen years younger than Pollock and twenty-two years younger than de Kooning, she played no part in the New York school's paint-slinging hullabaloo of the 1940s, but did present her work later in group exhibitions alongside that of the ab-ex stars. Mitchell was included in 1951's historic "Ninth Street Show" in New York, and her work of the early 1950s, Sandra Kraskin believes, "holds its own among the paintings of the pioneers." From decade to decade, the gutsy art of this master colorist grew stronger and stronger.

Despite Mitchell's international stature, however, the art world is still catching up with the breadth of her achievement. And, after the dollar-driven 1980s, it's still catching up with the most intangible—and priceless—quality found in the best art of any era: the near-perfection that can result from the almost spiritual quest for purity of form. That the art establishment is making a concentrated effort to reassess and celebrate work it previously overlooked is proof that what's new is old, and it's an eloquent testament to the lasting power and allure of American modernism. □