125 NEWBURY

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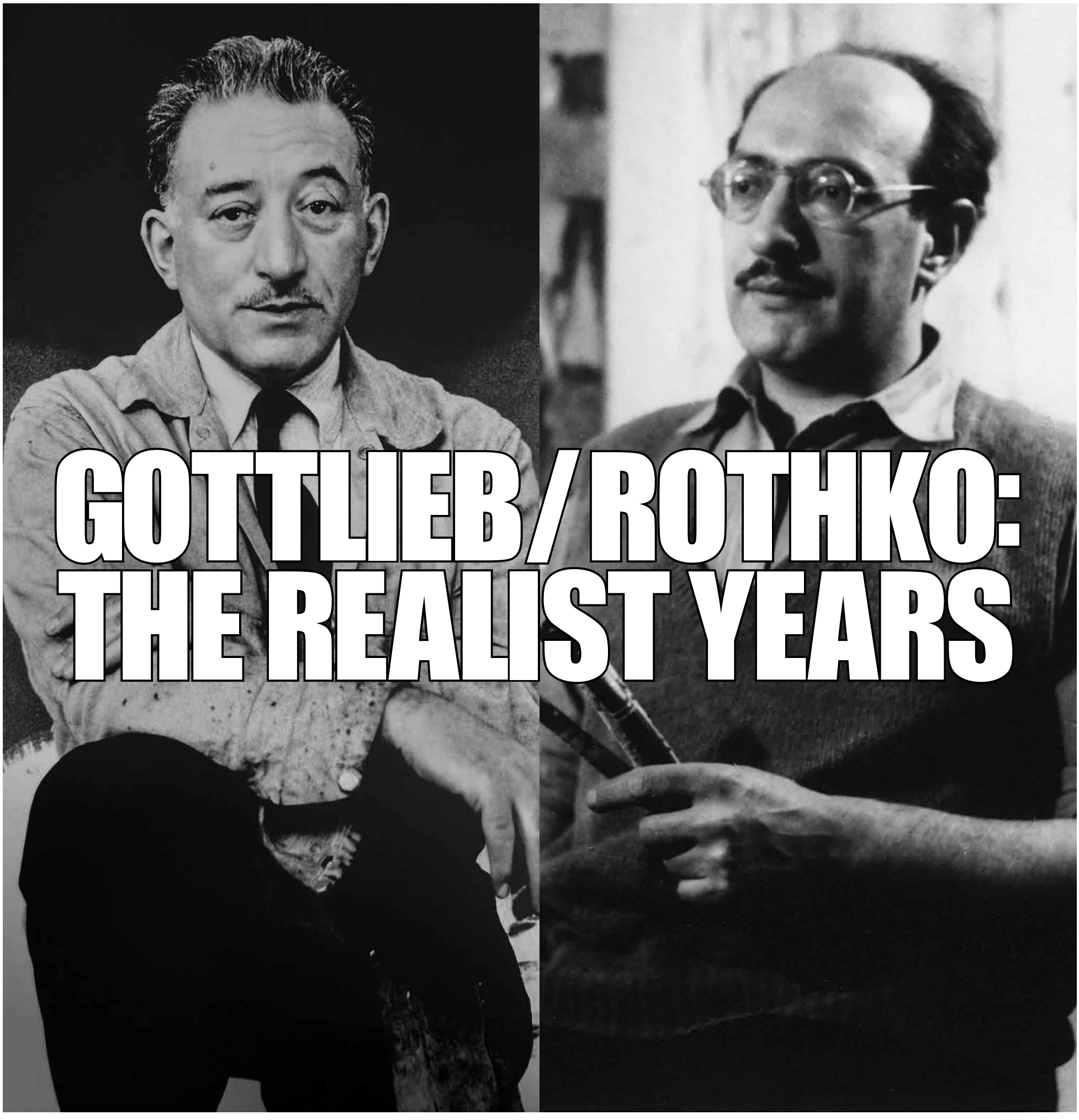

GOTTLIEB/ROTHKO: THE REALIST YEARS

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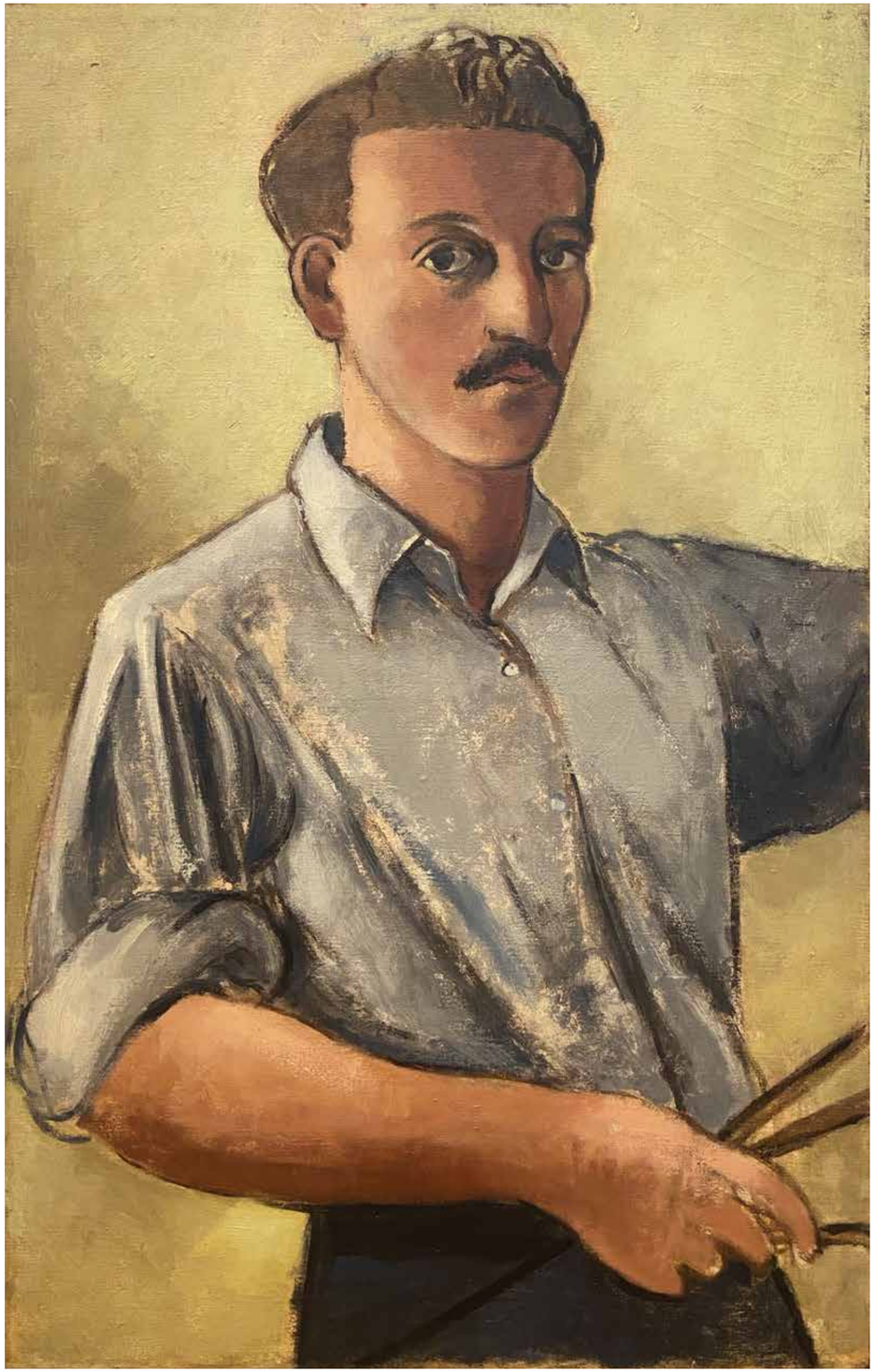
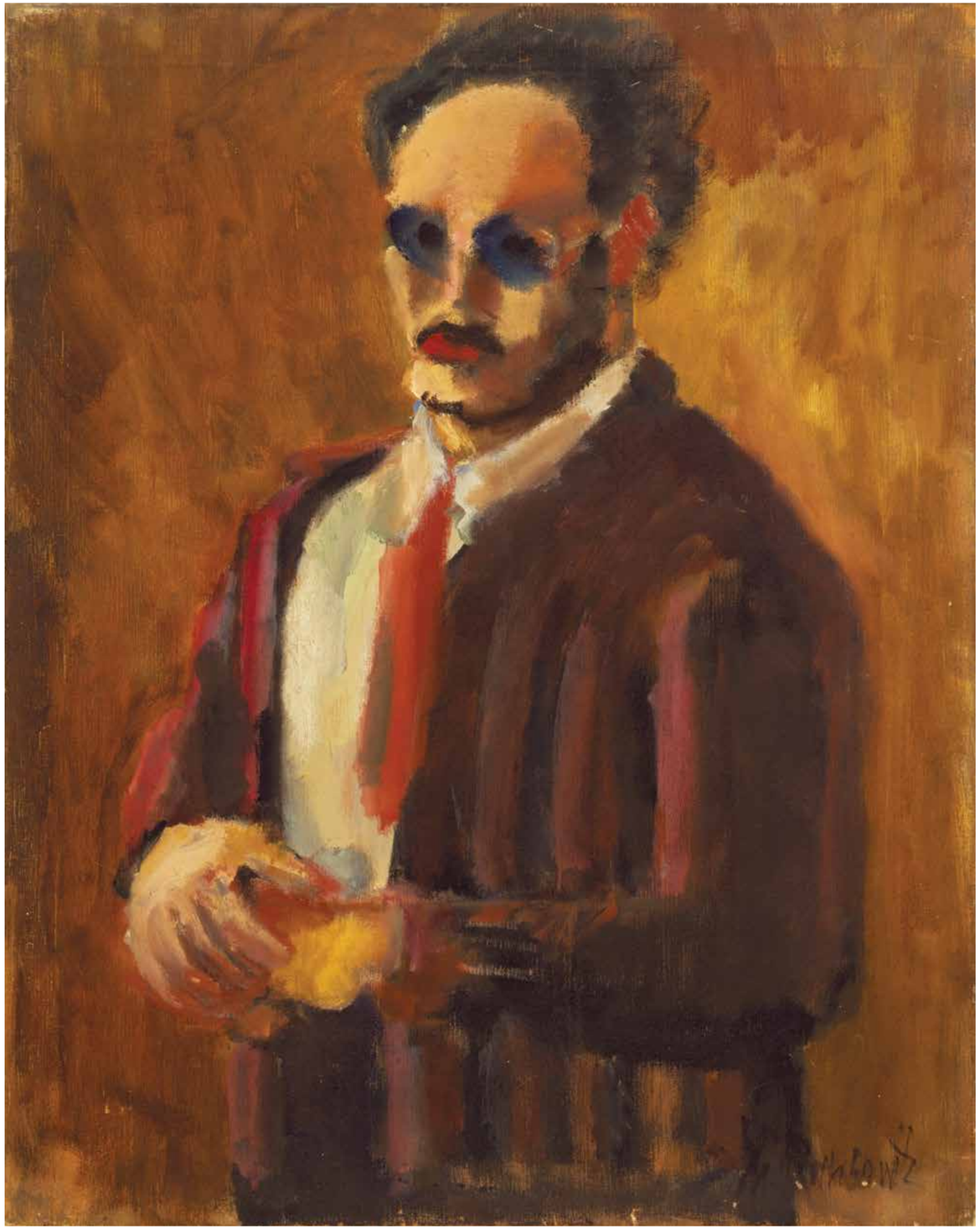


Adolph Gottlieb, *Untitled (Self Portrait)*, 1928. Oil on canvas. 33¾" × 21¹³⁄₁₆" © 2025 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation



Mark Rothko, *Self-Portrait*, 1936. Oil on canvas. 32¼" × 25¾" © 1998 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

INTRODUCTION

Arne Glimcher

In 1978, Pace was honored with the representation of the Rothko estate, and I had the opportunity to evaluate its contents. This was especially exciting to me as I had the pleasure of a close friendship with Rothko, which allowed me to visit his studio and see the process of his paintings, including the Houston Chapel. Representing the estate of an artist gives one the opportunity to discover previously unknown or lesser-known periods of work. The discoveries in the Rothko estate were astonishing, a celebration of the history of art. I viewed every drawing, painting on paper, and all of the canvases. For the first time, Rothko was revealed to me in all his complexity. Since 1978, Pace has presented 15 exhibitions of Rothko's achievements. Mining the strata of his trajectory, Pace has shown almost every facet of his development.

In 2001, *Mark Rothko: The Realist Years* was presented at Pace to publicly exhibit this unknown or under-discovered period for pleasure, scholarship and evaluation. Sadly it was October, just after the tragedy of 9/11, and relatively few people saw the exhibition. Recently, in the excellent Rothko retrospective at the Fondation Louis Vuitton curated by Suzanne Pagé and Christopher Rothko, the section of Rothko's realist paintings became one of the most discussed aspects of the show.

Pace was honored with the representation of Adolph Gottlieb in 2001. I was fortunate enough to know Adolph, and visited his studio in Soho, as well as in East Hampton, several times. However, in those early years I was only acquainted with his mature work, specifically the paintings and sculpture that Adolph was making during his last years. With the recent publication of the book *Adolph Gottlieb: A Powerful Will to Art* by Sanford Hirsch and James Lawrence, I was astonished to see how close Rothko and Gottlieb's work was during the formative years of the 1930's and 1940's. In one instance, these lifelong friends were painting and drawing each other in the same studio. *Gottlieb/Rothko: The Realist Years* at 125 Newbury will present two drawings, one by Gottlieb of Rothko, and another by Rothko of Gottlieb. In each image they are posing in the same chair, using the same mandolin as a prop. To my knowledge neither artist played the instrument.

This exhibition is presented in the hope that it extends the scholarship of both artists' careers and the influence that their friendship had on each other throughout their lives. It is especially relevant today, when many contemporary artists seem anchored in traditional figurative painting. For Gottlieb and Rothko, realism was only part of their voyage to create experiences that none of us had ever seen before. Both artists careers flowed from figuration, to surrealism, to abstraction, to the sublime. I hope this exhibition is as eye-opening to a new audience as it was to me when I first discovered the realist works of these two masters.

EXCERPT FROM:

MARK ROTHKO: FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Christopher Rothko

Rothko's handling of space in this portrait is perhaps the area of greatest formal similarity with the later work. Note how he brings all the compositional elements from the background to the frontal plane so that it is hard to tell what kind of space exists between the dresser and the building and the building and sky. This same flattening of perspective and ambiguity of space are hallmarks of his later work, and sources of much of their mesmerizing appeal.

Finally, and most evidently, there is Rothko's use of color. Of course, I have chosen these two canvases intentionally for the similarity of their color schemes, but what we see here also applies generally: one finds strong pre-echoes of Rothko's vibrant palette of the 1950s in his earlier work. Many of the figurative paintings of the 1930s bear the rich, bold hues, directly juxtaposed and broadly applied, for which Rothko would become famous in the 1950s.

Careful examination of Rothko's early work is both-rewarding in its own right and often revealing of multiple aspects of the artist's output yet to come. In terms of composition, aim, and content, there are at least as many similarities as differences. The earlier painting is saying here much of what the later work will ultimately declare with more confidence and authority.

Mark Rothko, *Portrait {Untitled}*, 1939. © 1998 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1954. © 1998 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

June 7, 1943

Mr. Edward Alden Jewell
Art Editor, New York Times
229 West 43 Street
New York, N. Y.

Dear Mr. Jewell:

To the artist, the workings of the critical mind is one of life's mysteries. That is why, we suppose, the artist's complaint that he is misunderstood, especially by the critic, has become a noisy commonplace. It is therefore, an event when the worm turns and the critic of the TIMES quietly yet publicly confesses his "befuddlement," that he is "non-plussed" before our pictures at the Federation Show. We salute this honest, we might say cordial reaction towards our "obscure" paintings, for in other critical quarters we seem to have created a bedlam of hysteria. And we appreciate the gracious opportunity that is being offered us to present our views.

We do not intend to defend our pictures. They make their own defense. We consider them clear statements. Your failure to dismiss or disparage them is prima facie evidence that they carry some communicative power.

We refuse to defend them because we cannot. It is an easy matter to explain to the befuddled that "The Rape of Persephone" is a poetic expression of the essence of the myth; the presentation of the concept of seed and its earth with all its brutal implications; the impact of elemental truth. Would you have us present this abstract concept with all its complicated feelings by means of a boy and girl lightly tripping?

It is just as easy to explain "The Syrian Bull", as a new interpretation of an archaic image, involving unprecedented distortions. Since art is timeless, the significant rendition of a symbol, no matter how archaic, has as full validity today as the archaic symbol had then. Or is the one 3000 years old truer?

But these easy program notes can help only the simple-minded. No possible set of notes can explain our paintings. Their explanation must come out of a consummated experience between picture and onlooker. The appreciation of art is a true marriage of minds. And in art, as in marriage, lack of consummation is ground for annulment.

The point at issue, it seems to us, is not an "explanation" of the paintings but whether the intrinsic ideas carried within the frames of these pictures have significance.

We feel that our pictures demonstrate our aesthetic beliefs, some of which we, therefore, list:

1. To us art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risks.

2. This world of the imagination is fancy-free and violently opposed to common sense.

3. It is our function as artists to make the spectator see the world our way—not his way.

4. We favor the simple expression of the complex thought. We are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth.

5. It is a widely accepted notion among painters that it does not matter what one paints as long as it is well painted. This is the essence of academicism. There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is *valid which is tragic and timeless*. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.

Consequently if our work embodies these beliefs, it must insult anyone who is spiritually attuned to interior decoration; pictures for the home; pictures for over the mantle; pictures of the American scene; social pictures; purity in art; prize-winning potboilers; the National Academy, the Whitney Academy, the Corn Belt Academy; buckeyes; trite tripe; etc.

Sincerely yours,

Adolph Gottlieb *[signature]*
Marcus Rothko *[signature]*

130 State Street
Brooklyn, New York

Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko's response to Edward Alden Jewell's review in the *New York Times*, June 7, 1943.
Courtesy of the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation

Mark Rothko, *[Man in chair playing mandolin]*, c. 1934. Crayon on bond paper. 12" × 8½"

Adolph Gottlieb, *Untitled (Mark Rothko With Mandolin)*, c. 1932. Crayon on paper. 12" × 8½"

Adolph Gottlieb, *South Ferry Waiting Room*, c. 1929. Oil on cotton. 36" × 45" © 2025 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation

Mark Rothko, *Entrance to Subway {Subway Station/Subway Scene}*, 1938. Oil on canvas. 34" × 46¼"
© 1998 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Mark Rothko, *[Waiting Room]*, 1935. Oil on canvas. 32" × 42" © 1998 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Clockwise from top-left: Mark Rothko, *[Subway]*, 1939. Oil on gesso board. 19" × 14"; *Untitled [Woman in Subway]*, 1938. Oil on canvas. 24⅛" × 18¹⁄₁₆"; *Subway*, 1938/1939. Oil on canvas. 34¼" × 29⅞" © 1998 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

THE REALIST YEARS
KLAUS KERTESS

CITY LIGHT

The work that Mark Rothko created in the 1930s literally and figuratively precedes the name he claimed for himself. Hindsight often makes an artist's development too orderly and urges formative work into a seamless narrative culminating in a signature style. Rothko's early paintings no more forecast the radiant rectangular nimbuses inhabiting his painted planes from 1949 until his death in 1970 than do Pablo Picasso's so-called Blue Period paintings forecast the planar atomizations of Cubism undertaken a decade later in 1910. Like such peers as Jackson Pollock and Clyfford Still, Rothko moved through the gummy straits of American Regionalism and Social Realism toward a goal he could hardly have perceived in 1930. His mentor Milton Avery and his friend Adolph Gottlieb, as well as Giorgio de Chirico, Edvard Munch, fifteenth-century Italian Renaissance portraiture, John Marin, and Max Ernst, contributed to the countercurrents of Rothko's development. And, yes, clues and evidence exist that point to the ultimate acts: inward stillness, dislocation, preoccupation with planar architecture; suffused, occasionally smoldering light.

Estrangement and anxiety colored Rothko's life and early art. Speaking no English, the Russian-born, ten-year-old Marcus Rothkowitz arrived in Portland, Oregon, with his mother and his sister in 1913 to join his father, who had emigrated three years earlier. English was not taught in the first grade of the school he attended. His father died in 1914. Happiness didn't figure in his youth, nor did art. Rothkowitz attended Yale University for two years (1922–23) without enrolling in any art classes. Briefly, he took a drawing class at the Art Students League in 1924 before returning to Portland to study acting. After coming back to New York a year later and being refused a scholarship to learn acting, he enrolled again in the Art Students League and studied with Max Weber (1925–26). Weber had been one of the earliest American converts to Cubism and a major messenger of modernism in New York, although he had now turned to more expressionistic figuration. Via Weber, Rothkowitz learned the lessons of Cezanne. However, his friendship with the older Milton Avery proved to be the more catalytic event of his early development. Avery had arrived in New York from Connecticut in 1925 and quickly shed his American Impressionist beginnings, enthusiastically embracing the flatness and saturated colors of Matisse and the Fauves, merging them with the ebullient plainness of much American folk art. Rothkowitz met Avery and his wife, Sally, through an old friend from Portland in 1928, and they began to see each other regularly. The almost perennially happy Connecticut Yankee and the almost perennially alienated Russian immigrant formed a critical nexus in the development of American modernism in the second quarter of the twentieth century. In 1929, Rothkowitz introduced Avery to his new friend Adolph Gottlieb, and they were occasionally joined by Barnett Newman and John Graham.

The acutely calibrated, flat planar organics of Avery's compositions, as well as his increasingly thinned-down layers of paint, which simulated the transparency of watercolor and drew an overall suffused light up to the surface from layers below, encouraged a newly assured compositional simplicity and layered painterly variegation in Rothkowitz's paintings. However, Avery's lyric refinement, wit, and deep commitment to landscape couldn't be further removed from the dark vapors of urban estrangement that enveloped Rothkowitz's paintings of the 1930s. Claustrophobic enigmas such as *Lesson* (1932–33) look more to Édouard Vuillard's compressed domestic interiors and to Rembrandt's simmering butterscotch surfaces than to Avery's breezy openness.

In 1932, Rothkowitz, his new wife Edith, and the Gottliebs spent their summer vacation together in Cape Ann, Massachusetts, near the Averys, whom they often visited in Gloucester. The rare, for Rothkowitz, subject of bathers seen in *Untitled (Two Nudes)* (1933–34) shows us that none of Rothkowitz's anxiety evaporated by the sea. The painting's very high horizon, lack of detail, and monumental, pared-down central nude call to Avery; but even Avery's darker, more mysterious paintings such as *Card Players* (1934) still endow his bather with a pneumatic grace and repose unknown to the crunched bundle of nerves trapped in the center of Rothkowitz's beach. And the nude's discomfort is bared not by moonlight but by some subterranean glare. Edvard Munch's traumatized muteness might have played some role here.

Throughout the 1930s, Rothkowitz continued to paint dark interior-exterior architectural spaces confined in shallow rectangularity and inhabited by one to three figures immobilized in traumatized stillness. Some of these dark-toned urban trances, such as *Untitled (Two Seated Women)* (1933–34), call to the grittier and more outwardly socially conscious works of the Ashcan School; others, such as *Untitled (Three Women)* (c. 1935), burden the carefree amplitude of Avery's color and figures with dour angst. The more surreal fragmentations and mutations Picasso began inflicting upon his figures after 1925, including the cannibalistic ferocity of the two heads in *The Kiss* (1931), seep through the melancholy embrace of Rothkowitz's *Untitled (Couple Kissing)* (1934–35).

None of these paintings is a mere pastiche. Avery's figures are posed and poised in curvilinearity. Roth-kowitz's figures hover in an awkward blockiness, at once alien to and trying to assimilate the regularity of their support. The canvas plane emits a subdued flicker of electric light rising through the visibly brushstroked layers of thin paint that simultaneously blur and define the shadowy figures. Rothkowitz achieved a kind of veiled expressionism that roiled the surface with slow-motion displacement, both physical and psychological. The light radiating from below and shifting the compositional play with the canvas plane's rectangularity coalesce into an eerie poetics of placelessness. At the same time, Rothkowitz was assimilating Avery; along with Rembrandt and post-Cubist Picasso, Pollock was assimilating the lessons of his teacher, Thomas Hart Benton, and of Albert Pinkham Ryder and El Greco, into paintings more viscerally agitated than those of Rothkowitz. More than a decade would still separate each from his stunning breakthrough.

Rothkowitz's paintings could hardly have been executed during a time other than the Depression; however, the year of the Depression's onset, 1929, marks the opening of the Museum of Modern Art and the marked increase of New York's role as an art center. While the Modern's agenda was dominated by European modernism and, two years later, the new Whitney Museum of American Art focused on American Regionalist and Social Realist painters largely untainted by European modernism, little attention was spent on local artists struggling to move beyond Social Realism toward modernism. In 1935, Rothkowitz, his friend Gottlieb, Ilya Bolotowsky, and six other artists formed The Ten (although they were only nine) to further their quest for new painting solutions that began to place more emphasis on the metaphysical than the social.

The year 1936 marks the beginning of a greater expansiveness in Rothkowitz's paintings—in his handling of paint, color, and composition. Rothkowitz had already been grinding many of his own pigments and now began mixing more white into his thinned layers of paint; variations in transparency and opacity, invisibly brushed and shiny-smooth over texture, in tonal depths, as well as in hues, all merge in glowing penumbral oscillations. Not a natural light, but an interior light, from within the paint, within the mind, within man-made space, hovers in a shimmering blur on the edge of the viewer's focus. In *Self-Portrait* (1936), we see the artist's contour emerging from and being eroded by an acidic orange into yellow into ocher into red light. Not the

Mark Rothko, *Portrait of Mary*, 1938/1939. Oil on canvas. 36" × 28⅛" © 1998 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

slightest of detail describes his space; only light defines the artist's place. Legs cut off by the bottom of the canvas, one hand folded over the other, he hovers, as stunned into silence as his other subjects. The circles of dark haze serving as Rothkowitz's glasses mediate between our eyes and his. Rothkowitz was afflicted with acute myopia that, without glasses, would cause distant objects to blur because they would focus in front of the retina rather than on it (Pierre Bonnard was similarly afflicted). One can only speculate upon the possible effect of his sight (when uncorrected by glasses) on the embodiment of his vision, but the evading of focus would, of course, help urge the later paintings toward mystery and intangibility.The bold simplification and massing of the artist's figure, combined with the large amount of space consumed by the contour, imbue Self-Portrait with a new confidence and monumentality—a confidence also visible in the more complex rectangular harmonics with which Rothkowitz scored canvases such as *Untitled (Cityscape)* (c. 1936). This painting and several other contemporaneous ones that conflate interior and exterior city views look to the liquefaction of Cubism initiated more than twenty years earlier by John Marin. Marin's fame rested on his watercolors, which had been critical to Avery's development and certainly encouraged Rothko's thinning of oil paint and quest for transparency. Marin was perhaps the most ubiquitous and influential of the earlier wave of American modernists. One of the few Americans to be recognized by the Museum of Modern Art, he was given a retrospective there in 1936.

The increasing attention that Rothkowitz paid to rectangular measure and the painted interior allusions to and allusions of the physical plane of the canvas is also indebted to the Italian Renaissance—to the architectural framing devices congruent with the support plane employed in so many Italian Renaissance portraits and depictions of the Madonna and Child, from Filippino Lippi in Florence to Titian in Venice. Even the medley of dryly brushed beiges configuring the window frame within the plane of *Untitled (Two Women at a Window)* (c. 1937) recalls Florentine masonry. And in his 1936 Interior, Rothkowitz riffed on Michelangelo's Laurentian Library, subtracting the curvilinear staircase in order to fuse the architectural articulation with the flat plane of the canvas. The resulting rectangular division does not prefigure the mature work but gives clear evidence of the crucial importance of measure to Rothkowitz and forms another bridge to his subsequent identity as Rothko.

A still-living Italian master, Giorgio de Chirico, further altered Rothkowitz's urban perspective. De Chirico arrived for a two-year stay in New York in 1936, the year that he was prominently featured in an exhibition critical to the development of the Abstract Expressionism generation: Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism at the Museum of Modern Art. The disjunctive plazas combining radically tilted ramps and mute mannequins, as well as nostalgic allusions to Classical myth and culture, that filled de Chirico's paintings from 1910 to 1918 had already inspired many of the Surrealists (he was not known in New York until his work started to be exhibited there in 1928). New York City, with its skyscraper Babel of historical styles laid out on a grid, had fueled de Chirico's fantasies long before his arrival; and now, de Chirico's imaginary vistas begin to encourage Rothkowitz to more emphatically distort his observation-dependent vision.

In the sketches Rothkowitz drew in subway stations, he retained the shallow frontal space so prevalent in his work in oil; but, in the paintings of underground subway stations he created between 1937 and 1939, the platform was tilted into more vertiginous perspectival distortion until, in 1939, it became almost vertical. And the figures frozen in anticipation became more generalized, almost wooden in theirashen whiteness. While not nearly so disjunctive and assertively, ambiguously symbolic as a painting like de Chirico's *The Duo* or *The Mannequins of the Rose Tower* (1915; seen in his 1935 Pierre Matisse Gallery exhibition), the haunted nowhereness and vacuous silence of Rothkowitz's subterranean platforms become metaphors for a kind of mental limbo where loss and anticipation are locked in stalemate. The more willful abstractness and geometric rigor further remove Rothkowitz's work from the more purely Social Realist treatment common to this subject. Walker Evans, like John Sloan and others before him, also turned to the subway; but the remarkable photographs he created between 1938 and 1941 were made not on the platform but inside subway cars with a hidden camera and reflect more readily identifiable urban apprehensions.

Rothkowitz enveloped his above-ground domestic interiors in vapors often as enigmatic as those enfolding his subway underworld. The volumes of the ordinarily dressed couple seen in *Untitled (Standing Man and Woman)* (1938) seem to have been compressed between the foreground of the painting and the rectangular architectural details of the background—looking as if they have been ironed into the architecture of the plane to become denizens of rectangularity. Occasionally, the figures exceed by far in size and scale the interiors meant to house them, as does the nude in *Seated Figure* (1939). This female figure calls to the often radically overscaled figures in de Chirico's late, fluffy paintings such as *Antique Nudes* (1927; seen in his second New York exhibition at the end of 1928).

And Rothkowitz's subdued color took on more radiance. Lightened with white and activated into a glimmering veil by increasingly varied layers of thinly brushed paint, as we can see in the 1938 *Untitled (Seated Woman)*. Everything becomes subservient to the creation of light. The brushstroking-drawing maintains a discreet visibility and works primarily to encourage short, irregular, multidirectional strokes to layer into a viscous screen perforated by light. The figure seems to exist primarily as a carrier of light and mediator between mottled red and white. In that half on her white side, her dark coat is shot through with a haphazard damask of reddish light; and, on the red side, her coat sparkles with a dew of off-white. Only the foreshortening of the chair legs hints at mimetic space in this flutter of irregular rectangularity.

In January 1940, Marcus Rothkowitz changed his name to Mark Rothko. He had not been able to grow into the three syllables of his birth name, already once transcribed from one alphabet to another. Very early in his life, two uncles had changed their name to Roth and one to Weinstein; and his mother changed her name from Anna to Kate. Rothko, less ordinary than Roth and unburdened of its ending, which means "joke" in German, retained some of its immigrant origins while achieving an iconic simplicity, visual and oral. Like his name, the art Rothko began in 1940 marked a new beginning without denying its past.

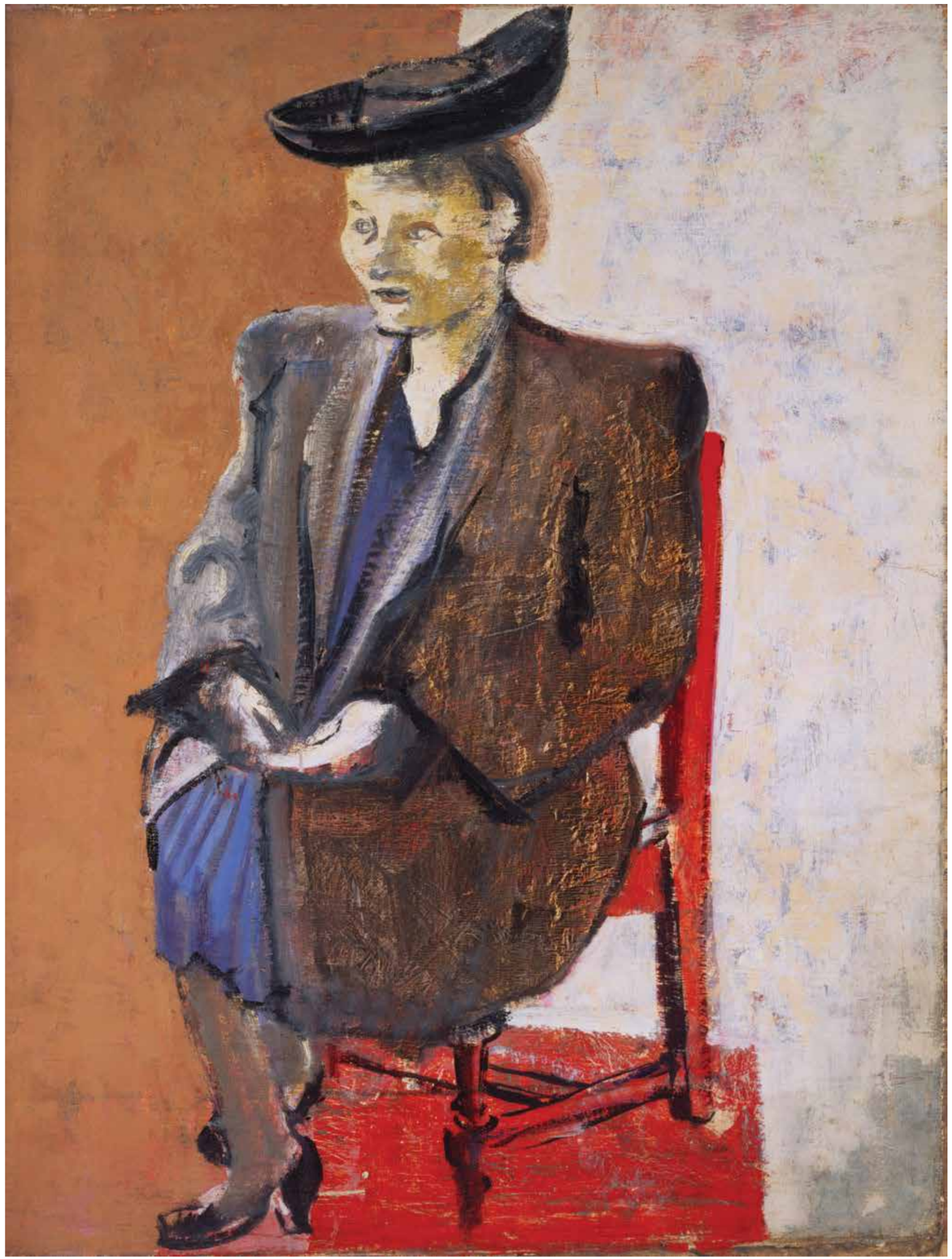
In 1940, Rothko and Gottlieb saw each other daily and entered into a more urgent dialogue about the direction of their art. As war engulfed Europe, more and more artists rejected political ideals, seeking instead a primal universality—a reaction not uncommon in times of cataclysm. In New York, this turn from world politics to the collective unconscious had already begun in 1939, when the Hitler-Stalin pact made it difficult for Communist sympathizers, including the members of The Ten, to maintain political allegiance to the Soviet Union. The left's disillusionment with Communism was then exacerbated by Hitler's maniacal destruction. With the realization that one political system was no different from another, Rothko and Gottlieb, like many of their peers, abandoned the warring world for internal truths, embracing Surrealism's advocacy of the unconscious as the legitimate source of art. They too embarked on a path of destruction—metaphorical destruction and reclamation. Physical observation would be displaced by metaphysical imagining. Both Gottlieb and Rothko sought to retrieve the mythic. Not necessarily specific myths, although each occasionally turned to one, but a retrieval of the embodiment of a mythic consciousness.

Their first forays toward the metaphysical engaged more imagined subjects and imposed more radical distortions on the congruent, stagelike space each had previously employed. Rothko's *Oedipus* (1940) has sprouted multiple profiles and limbs (one arm about to poke an eye out) and looks like a carnivalesque mutant of de Chirico's late classicizing figures. The interior space dissolves in a panoply of rectangularity in harmony with the shape of the painting but mimetically undecipherable. Rothko continued to retain a highly schematized stagelike space, whereas Gottlieb, in 1941, began turning his canvases into irregular grids, each section of which contained a stick figure head or arm or a fish or an eye or a spiral. His Pictographs looked to Paul Klee's childlike simplicities, as well as to the tribal art and cave painting previously so admired by Picasso and the Surrealists and featured in exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in 1935 and 1937. Rothko sometimes preferred more classical distortions, partially in response to his dialogue with Gottlieb, compartmentalizing sections of figures in coffinlike rectangles, as in *Crucifix* (1941–42). The squared-off, morphed together faces seen in *Heads* (1941–42) look as if they grew out of and into the rectangle of the canvas—the subject becomes a culture of the rectangular.

In 1942, bird and vegetal phantasms began to populate Rothko's plans. The beaked creatures on the right in *Untitled* (1942) look like relatives of Max Ernst's avian monster Loplop; and the figure of Iphigenia in *Sacrifice of Iphigenia* (1942) looks more like a griffin than human. Clearly Rothko was absorbing more Surrealist fabulism. At the same time, his variegated strokes of paint became lighter in both hue and touch, making his work more translucent and more and more like watercolor. And, indeed, beginning in 1944, watercolor and arabesquing wisps of water creatures would largely fill Rothko's painting and subject it to the sea change that, by the end of the decade, transformed his rectangles into figures of spirit.

Rothko arrived late to painting and to his name. The work he created in the 1930s is filled with an intensity, pathos, and brooding light that embody not only his personal sense of dislocation, but that of much of the population at large during the decade of the Depression. This work also reveals the critical importance of measure, which would continue to figure in Rothko's art throughout his career. It was the city and its kaleidoscopic rectangularity—not landscape—that fueled Rothko's work from the beginning (the tripartite rectangular division so prevalent in Rothko's painting in almost every phase of his work undermines the reading of a landscape horizon). In the 1930s, the rectangle staged the vulnerably mortal figure; in the 1950s, the rectangle became the metaphysically vulnerable figure.

Installation view of the exhibition *Mark Rothko: The Realist Years*, Pace Wildenstein, October 31, 2001–January 5, 2002



Mark Rothko, *[Seated woman]*, 1938. Oil on canvas. 32⅛" × 24¼" © 1998 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Adolph Gottlieb, *Untitled (Portrait—Leopard Coat)*, 1934. Oil on canvas. 33⅝" × 25⅝" © 2025 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation

Mark Rothko, *Nude*, 1938/39. Oil on canvas. 36" × 24" © 1998 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; *[Standing female nude]*, 1938/1939. Ink on Bond paper. 10⅞" × 8½"; *[Seated female nude]*, 1938/1939. Ink on Bond paper. 11¼" × 7⁹⁄₁₆" © 2025 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Adolph Gottlieb, *Seated Nude*, 1934. Oil on canvas. 39⁹⁄₁₆" × 35½" © 2025 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation

Clockwise from left: Mark Rothko, *[Seated Man]*, 1938/1939. Oil on canvas. 40" × 30"; *Craftsman*, 1938/1939. Oil on linen. 36" × 29⅝";
Portrait {Untitled}, 1939. Oil on canvas. 39⅞" × 30¼" © 1998 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Clockwise from left: Adolph Gottlieb, *Untitled (Alex with Mandolin)*, c. 1930. Oil on linen. 19⅞" × 16"; *Untitled (Esther)*, c. 1936. Oil on canvas. 32" × 24⅞";
Untitled (Cora's Two Sisters), c. 1932. Oil on table linen, mounted on board. 19⅞" × 16" © 2025 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation

Mark Rothko, *[Woman in red armchair]*, 1936/1937. Watercolor on Construction paper. 16" × 12⅛" © 2025 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; *Woman Combing Her Hair*, 1932–1933. Oil on canvas mounted on board. 31¾" × 24" © 1998 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Adolph Gottlieb, *Untitled (Portrait of Emil)*, c. 1934. Oil on canvas. 33⅞" × 26" © 2025 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation

Adolph Gottlieb, *Untitled (Max Margulis)*, c. 1935. Oil on canvas. 26⅝" × 19⅝" © 2025 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation

Puzzling Pictures in the Show by the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors Exemplify the Artists' Approach

Entente Cordiale

The first statement at hand is jointly signed by Adolph Gottlieb and Marcus Rothko; and, while dealing in part with general esthetic and critical issues, it bears specific reference to the paintings by these two artists, which are reproduced. Here is the preamble:

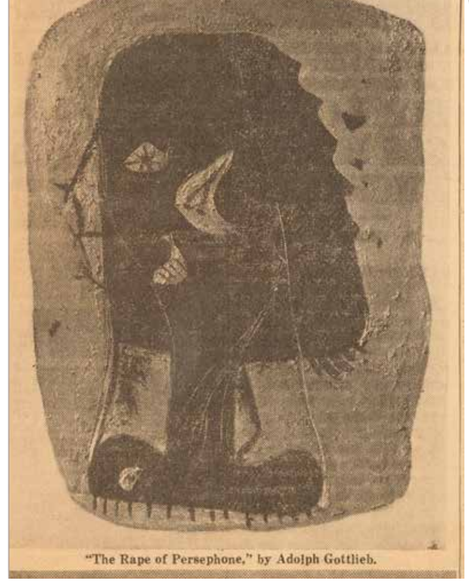
To the artist the workings of the critical mind is one of life's mysteries. That is why, we suppose, the artist's complaint that he is misunderstood, especially by the critic, has become a noisy commonplace. It is therefore an event when the worm turns and the critic quietly, yet publicly, confesses his "befuddlement," that he is "nonplused" before our pictures at the federation show. We salute this honest, we might say cordial, reaction toward our "obscure" paintings, for in other critical quarters we seem to have created a bedlam of hysteria. And we appreciate the gracious opportunity that is being offered us to present our views.

Now since (in behalf of a conceivable public need along these lines) I had asked the artists merely for an explanation, it came as no shock of surprise to read:

We do not intend to defend our pictures. They make their own defense. We consider them clear statements. Your failure to dismiss or disparage them is prima facie evidence that they carry some communicative power.

We refuse to defend them not because we cannot. It is an easy matter to explain to the befuddled that "The Rape of Persephone" is a poetic expression of the essence of the myth; the presentation of the concept of seed and its earth with all its brutal implications; the impact of elemental truth. Would you have us present this abstract concept, with all its complicated feelings, by means of a boy and girl lightly tripping?

It is just as easy to explain "The Syrian Bull" as a new interpretation of an archaic image, involving unprecedented distortions. Since art is timeless, the significant rendition of a symbol, no matter how archaic, has as full validity today as the archaic symbol had then. Or is the one 3,000 years old truer?



"The Rape of Persephone," by Adolph Gottlieb.

"Consummated Experience"

Well, up to this point it seemed as if we might be going to get somewhere on a concrete basis. But—

these easy program notes can help only the simple-minded. No possible set of notes can explain our paintings. Their explanation must come out of a consummated experience between picture and onlooker. The point at issue, it seems to us, is not an "explanation" of the paintings, but whether the intrinsic ideas carried within the frames of these pictures have significance. We feel that our pictures demonstrate our esthetic beliefs, some of which we, therefore, list:

1. To us art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risks.

2. This world of the imagination is fancy-free and violently opposed to common sense.

3. It is our function as artists to make the spectator see the world our way—not his way.

4. We favor the simple expression of the complex thought. We are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth.

5. It is a widely accepted notion among painters that it does not matter what one paints as long as it is well painted. This is the essence of academism. There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.

Period. But there is one paragraph more, which covers considerable ground and treads on enough toes to keep the chiropodists busy all Summer:

Consequently, if our work embodies these beliefs it must insult any one who is spiritually attuned to interior decoration; pictures for the home; pictures for over the mantel; pictures of the American scene; social pictures; purity in art; prize-winning potboilers; the National Academy, the Whitney Academy, the Corn Belt Academy; buckeyes; trite tripe, etc.

Edward Alden Jewell, "'GLOBALISM' POPS INTO VIEW: Puzzling Pictures in the Show by the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors Exemplify the Artists' Approach," *The New York Times*, June 13, 1943

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: HIS LIFE AND ART

Mary Davis MacNaughton

PART I: STUDENT YEARS AND EARLY WORK, 1903–1940

East Tenth Street, across from Tompkins Square Park, is a quiet island in the noisy ocean of New York City—a tranquil neighborhood of modest brownstones. It looks much the same today as it did on March 14, 1903, when Adolph Gottlieb was born there to his parents, Emil (1872–1947) and Elsie (1882–1958) Gottlieb.[1] As children they had emigrated with their families to the United States from an area of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, now Czechoslovakia. In New York Elsie Berger's father became a wholesale grocer, and Emil's father, Leopold Gottlieb, established a stationery supply business, called L. Gottlieb & Sons. On June 15, 1902, Elsie and Emil married and settled in New York, where Emil succeeded his father in the family business. Adolph (1903–1974), their first child and only son, was followed by Edna (1908–1956) and Rhoda (1914–).

During the years Gottlieb was growing up, his family lived in the Bronx until moving in the mid-twenties to 285 Riverside Drive, Manhattan.[2] "I'm a born New Yorker," he said. "I was born on Tenth Street . . . But I left Tenth Street when I was about five or six years old."[3] Gottlieb was raised in a comfortable Jewish home in which his parents hoped that he would eventually enter the family business. But even as a child he began to resist their career expectations for him. At an early age, sometime during his teenage years, he became interested in art. As a teenager Gottlieb rebelled by becoming preoccupied with art, which his parents, as he recalled, deplored.[4] In 1919, increasingly dissatisfied with high school, he dropped out and began working in his father's business. But stationery did not appeal to him either. This disappointed his parents, who worried about his impractical pursuit of art, yet they were unable to dim his enthusiasm.

Gottlieb exhibited an independent attitude at a young age, moving from one art school to another. During high school he had taken Saturday classes at the Art Students' League, and in the summer of 1920 he enrolled in a life drawing class at the Parsons School of Design. He also took a design course at Cooper Union, and in the winter and spring of 1921 attended Robert Henri's lectures at the League.[5] Henri's non-academic approach to painting, which he espoused in these lively talks, left its imprint on Gottlieb. He was especially affected by Henri's advice to paint directly on the canvas, instead of from a preliminary sketch. That Gottlieb absorbed Henri's method is seen in his preference throughout his career for working without sketches to ensure a freshness of expression.

At this time Gottlieb also studied basic techniques of painting from reading on his own. He recalled reading a "book on painting by a fellow named Hamilton Easter Field," which was probably *The Technique of Oil Painting and Other Essays* (1913).[6] Gottlieb remembered that it was from this book "I learned how to prime a canvas, how to size it . . . in the traditional way." From Field he also acquired a taste for low-keyed color, which he continued to hold for many years. Gottlieb recalled that Field recommended "the palette that the old masters used. Primarily earth colors . . . I still think it is quite sound because the greatest colors are these very simple colors."[7]

But more than Field, it was John Sloan who helped shape Gottlieb's early style. In 1921 Gottlieb enrolled in an illustration course with Sloan, who had established his reputation as a leading artist in the Eight, the group of realist painters who were the pioneers of American twentieth-century art. Sloan, who during the twenties taught artists as diverse as Alexander Calder, Gottlieb, John Graham, Reginald Marsh, and George L. K. Morris, was popular with students because he encouraged them to pursue individual directions in their art. Before developing their own styles, however, Sloan told students to "study the masters to learn what they did and how they did it, to find a reason for being a painter yourself."[8]

Gottlieb took Sloan's advice to heart. But he was not content with studying the art available in New York museums—he had to go to Europe. His parents were shocked when, in 1921, at the age of eighteen, Gottlieb announced that he was going abroad. In spite of their objections, he departed, accompanied by a high-school friend who, like him, had no passport. Gottlieb and his friend worked their way to Europe on a passenger ship bound for Le Havre.

EUROPE, 1921–1922

Gottlieb wanted to study art in Paris but had no money for tuition, so he went to the life drawing class at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, an institution where registration cards were checked only periodically. So as not to be caught, Gottlieb worked from the model on the days between the instructor's visits. He attended only this sketch class and had no formal instruction in Paris. Instead, he spent most of his time doing what Sloan advised—studying the works of the old masters at first hand. Almost daily he visited the Louvre, and he became particularly taken with Renaissance painting, in particular panel painting of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Later he drew on his memory of these segmented, polyptych compositions as he formulated the grids in his Pictographs. Gottlieb was also interested in nineteenth-century painting, especially the work of Ingres, Delacroix, Courbet and the Post-Impressionists.[9] The modern painting he saw in Paris also impressed him immensely, and years later he vividly remembered first seeing Léger's *Three Women*, Picasso's *The Three Musicians* (both 1921, The Museum of Modern Art), as well as contemporary work by Matisse.[10]

Gottlieb explored Paris on his own, enjoying the role of the young bohemian, visiting galleries and frequenting the Sylvia Dietz bookshop, then a popular meeting place for artists. But because he did not speak French, he did not make contacts with French artists. He was young and lacked confidence, so he also kept his distance from well-known Americans in Paris.[11]

Gottlieb's stay in Paris came to an end when he and his friend were finally caught without papers. They were taken to the American Embassy, where officials contacted Gottlieb's uncle, attorney Samuel Berger, who arranged for their papers and informed their parents of their whereabouts. As a result, Gottlieb, who had spent nearly all his money, had his finances temporarily replenished. This allowed him to travel to Vienna, Berlin, Dresden and Munich, where he spent most of his time, as he had in Paris, in museums and galleries, looking at works by the old masters and the German Expressionists.[12]

Gottlieb's excursion to Europe had an important effect on his development as an artist. From constant looking in museums and galleries he developed an appreciation of a wide range of art, from Renaissance panel painting to Cubism and Expressionism. Although at the age of eighteen he was not ready to adopt modernist styles in his own work, his early exposure to avant-garde painting made it easier for him to incorporate concepts from it at a later date. With the exception of Hofmann and de Kooning, who received their artistic training abroad, Gottlieb was the only Abstract Expressionist to acquire a direct knowledge of modern art in Europe at such a formative stage in his career. No doubt it was also this early awareness of contemporary European art that helped form his receptivity for the pioneering American scene painting and social realism. Moreover, Gottlieb's appreciation of the modern tradition, which began on this trip and grew during the twenties and thirties, enabled him in his *Pictographs* of 1941–42 easily to transform sources in Surrealism and abstraction for his own expressive purposes.[13]

RETURN TO NEW YORK AND JOHN SLOAN

After returning from Europe in 1922, Gottlieb naturally thought of himself as a sophisticated, urbane artist. While this attitude was not appreciated by his parents, it earned him special status among his friends, especially Barnett Newman. Newman looked up to Gottlieb, who was two years older and had traveled on his own through Europe. Newman thought of him as a "romantic figure…already a dedicated artist."[14] That he enjoyed this image of himself is seen in the photograph of Gottlieb, Newman and friends in New York in 1924 (fig. 1). Newman, then in City College, wearing a dark suit and bow tie, looks like the young professor, while Gottlieb, holding a cigarette and sporting a hat at a rakish angle, plays the part of the bohemian.

In New York, Gottlieb continued, as he had in Europe, to look at art. On weekends he and Newman spent hours visiting museums and galleries. One of their favorite haunts was The Metropolitan Museum of Art, where Gottlieb was attracted to the work of El Greco, Rembrandt, and Cézanne. Urged by his parents to finish school, in 1922 Gottlieb enrolled in Washington Irving High School in Manhattan, taking night classes, while working in his father's store. But his European trip had confirmed his desire to be an artist, so he continued to rebel against his parents' wish that he enter the family business. They insisted that if he continued in art, he should at least get training to teach so that he could support himself. Consequently in 1923 he took the Teacher Training Program at the Parsons School of Design, graduating the next year.

In January 1923, Gottlieb also entered Sloan's painting class at the League, where he seriously took up painting. Gottlieb's earliest known paintings, *Portrait* (Illustration no. 1) and *Nude Model* (fig. 2), were probably done in Sloan's class in 1923.[15] Here in his dark palette and painterly technique Gottlieb assimilates the realism of Sloan, who in turn was influenced by the chiaroscuro styles of Velasquez and Rembrandt. Both the example of Sloan and the memory of works by these Baroque masters were no doubt fresh in Gottlieb's mind as he began his first paintings. In *Portrait* Gottlieb echoes Sloan's deep color range in his resonant tones of browns and greens. He also uses a traditional method of underpainting learned from Sloan, layering light and dark shades on a middle-toned ground to achieve a sense of sculptural volume in the model's head and shoulders.

In addition to these traditional methods, Gottlieb absorbed more advanced ideas from Sloan. Because he had studied under Henri, Sloan also believed in painting directly on the canvas and broadly massing forms with color. Gottlieb followed this practice in figure studies, such as *Portrait,* in which, instead of merely recording his observations, he also draws from his memory of the model's forms. He recalled that Sloan encouraged him to "do things that were not exactly literal and to work from imagination and memory . . . he implanted that idea rather early in me."[16]

In emphasizing the evolution of Gottlieb's abstract style, the literature on his work has just begun to examine these first paintings and other works of the twenties and thirties.[17] But these early pictures are important, as they contain the roots of later tendencies in his art. First, in the areas of impasto in *Portrait* and *Nude Model* one can see Gottlieb's initial interest in creating a surface of textural variety, which he continues to develop in new ways throughout his career. Second, at the onset Gottlieb began painting directly on the canvas and drawing from his imagination; so he was naturally predisposed to the Surrealist method of automatism and was able to adopt it quickly to his own ends in his *Pictographs* of the early 1940s.

Most of all, Gottlieb appreciated Sloan's open-minded attitude towards avant-garde European art. Though Sloan did not adopt these styles himself, he introduced his students to them. "John Sloan had the most valuable influence on me because Sloan was a very liberal guy for his time. For any time. He was interested in Cubism, for example,"[18] Gottlieb said. But whereas Sloan presented Cubism only as a learning device, Gottlieb saw it as a viable means of expression in itself.

In 1924 Gottlieb graduated from Sloan's class and sometime later began painting on his own in a studio he rented on 17th Street. From 1926 to 1929 he took evening classes at the League with Richard Lahey, and for a brief period he also attended the sketch class at the Educational Alliance, a community center on East Broadway, where he came into contact with other artists, including Chaim Gross, Newman, Rothko, Louis Schanker, Moses and Raphael Soyer, and Ben Shahn.

The continuing influence of Sloan may be seen in the subdued palette of Gottlieb's work of the mid-twenties. In *Still Life–Gate Leg Table* (Illustration 2), signed and dated 1925, Gottlieb contrasted dissimilar textures of wood, cloth, and metal in muted tones of brown, ivory, and ochre. In *Grand Concourse* (c. 1927, Illustration 3) he enlivened his palette, painting the city street in soft shades of lavender and brown, accented by the brighter red and green tones in the tile roof and grass in the foreground.

But in the late twenties Gottlieb began to search for a more imaginative style than he had developed under Sloan. Since his trip to Europe in 1921, he had increasingly felt that American painting was provincial. While he had seen Cubism in Paris and had studied it in Sloan's class, Gottlieb at that time was more affected by Cézanne's art, which offered a subjective approach to perception while not sacrificing representation. Gottlieb looked closely at Cézanne's painting, which he could have seen at The Metropolitan Museum and in 1929 at the opening show of The Museum of Modern Art.[19] It was Cézanne's portraiture that had an impact on Gottlieb's painting of this period. In *Interior (Self-Portrait)* of c. 1927 (Illustration 5), his image of himself—seated at a table covered with books and leaning to one side, lost in thought—may have been based on a memory of Cézanne's later portraits, which reflect a similar mood of introspection. Another allusion to Cézanne is seen in Gottlieb's ambiguous space, which he creates by tilting the floor toward the picture plane so that objects on it fluctuate between two and three dimensions, as in the pattern of the rug at the lower right.

In 1929 Gottlieb began showing at the Opportunity Gallery on 56th Street, which featured monthly exhibitions of work by young artists, chosen by established figures such as Max Weber and Yasuo Kuniyoshi. In the January show, selected by Weber, Gottlieb, with five canvases, was singled out by an anonymous reviewer as "among the most developed of the oil painters."[20] It was at the opening of this show that Gottlieb met Milton Avery. About the same time he became a friend of Mark Rothko, who had also recently met Avery. Thus, in 1929 these three artists began lifelong friendships.

THE DEPRESSION: FROM REALISM TO EXPRESSIONISM

In 1929 Gottlieb also entered a nationwide competition for young artists, sponsored by the Dudensing Gallery in New York, in which he won a first prize along with Konrad Cramer. As an award, in May 1930 the gallery gave them one-man shows, Gottlieb's first. Among the works he exhibited were *South Ferry Waiting Room* (c. 1929, Illustration 6), *Brooklyn Bridge* (c. 1930, Illustration 7), and *The Wasteland* (c. 1930, Illustration 8).

The style of these pictures, which Gottlieb painted at the beginning of the Depression, is more expressionistic, reflecting his response to this period of stress and uncertainty. As he had in the twenties, Gottlieb continued to use a muted palette, as seen in *Brooklyn Bridge*. Although this picture is related to the tradition of Sloan's genre scenes of New York, such as *The City from Greenwich Village* (1922, fig. 3), its inward view is opposed to Sloan's dynamic vista. In contrast to Sloan's panorama in which

Adolph Gottlieb, *Untitled (Two Nude Models)*, 1934. Oil on canvas. 24¾" × 29⅝"; *Conference*, 1935. Oil on canvas. 24¾" × 31⅛" © 2025 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation

Adolph Gottlieb, *Untitled (Artist And Model)*, 1934. Oil on canvas. 31¾" × 24⅛" © 2025 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation

skyscrapers glow on the distant horizon like beacons of hope, Gottlieb's city is colored by his own reflection. In the tradition of Joseph Stella and Hart Crane, whose works he surely knew, Gottlieb adopted the *Brooklyn Bridge* as an emblem of New York. But instead of a gateway to a vital city, his bridge is a barrier before a ghostly metropolis. The figures in the picture have no contact with each other and are faceless strangers, trapped in a claustrophobic space, defined by the converging forms of the bridge. Gottlieb may have been inspired by a memory of Edward Munch's haunting pictures of the loneliness of urban life in his evocation of brooding, suspended time. It was the introverted emotional focus of Expressionism that attracted Gottlieb during this time of anxiety in his own life and the world.

But this romantic side of Gottlieb's painting at the beginning of the thirties also derived from his interest in modern poetry. Later he recalled that during this time he had a "sympathy for the poets," especially Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot.[21] Not surprisingly, Gottlieb liked poetry that echoed his own emotional state. Indeed, after reading T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* he painted a picture titled *The Wasteland* (c. 1930, Illustration 8). Inspired by the dispirited mood of Eliot's poem, he formulated a more symbolic expression in the figures who seem to embody a sense of alienation. The subjective tendency in his art that emerged at this time was to resurface in 1937–38 in his Arizona still lifes and again in 1941 in his first *Pictographs*. But here, as then, he avoids specific symbols in favor of ambiguous images. Works such as *The Wasteland*, which he remembered as "lonely figures in a desolate landscape,"[22] reflect his feelings of isolation as a young artist living through the Depression.

In the early thirties Gottlieb began to adopt a style revealing the influence of Avery and, ultimately, of Matisse. In The *Wasteland* Gottlieb simplifies forms, defining them with thick, dark contour lines. Like Avery, he also contrasts painted and incised lines and brushes up to the edges of forms, surrounding them with shadows that do not create a sense of depth as much as reverberation. This haloing technique,[23] which Gottlieb first employed in his expressionist works of the early thirties, reappears later in abstract form in the auras around discs in the Bursts. But thirties, represents a latent shadow in Gottlieb's search for his own style. While *The Wasteland* is a transitional work in Gottlieb's search for his own style, while he attempted a greater distillation of form, he still maintained a dark palette and a heavily painted surface, reflecting the lingering influence of Sloan.

At the age of twenty-six, with a solo show at Dudensing Gallery to his credit, Gottlieb felt as if his career had been launched. "There were only a few galleries in New York and since my show was well-received, this seemed to me that I was an artist. Nobody could say I wasn't an artist now," Gottlieb recalled. But the Depression shattered his optimism and youthful hopes for success.

On June 12, 1932, at the age of twenty-nine, Gottlieb married Esther Dick, a petite, attractive young woman from Connecticut who was working in New York in a design shop. They had little money, beginning their short marriage in the middle of the Depression, and Gottlieb often painted over old canvases to economize on art supplies. He also took part-time jobs teaching art at settlement houses in New York, but as he only made a small amount of money, Esther secured a full-time position teaching sewing and design at a high school in Brooklyn.[24]

In November 1933 they moved from a small studio apartment at 14 Christopher Street in Greenwich Village to 155 State Street, near Borough Hall in Brooklyn. While living in this area near Brooklyn Heights and Cobble Hill, they made friends with several artists with whom Gottlieb associated throughout the thirties. Among these were Louis Schanker and Louis Harris. A frequent visitor to Ten, the exhibiting group Gottlieb helped to found in its early twenties at the Art Brooklyn was John Graham, whom Gottlieb had met in the early twenties, sponsoring Students' League and with whom he had formed a fast friendship.[25] Graham when he became a United States citizen.

Other artist friends living in Brooklyn in 1933 were David Smith and his wife, Dorothy Dehner, and Edgar Levy and his wife, Lucille Corcos.[26] Within this circle Gottlieb was closest to David Smith, whom he frequently saw from 1934 to 1940, when Smith was making his sculptures at the Terminal Iron Works in Brooklyn. He felt an affinity with Smith because he was also attracted to European avant-garde art. Indeed, by 1932 Smith was developing an abstract style, making Cubist sculptures. During this time Gottlieb also came to know a friend of Smith's, an older artist and a former student of Robert Henri—Stuart Davis. Gottlieb admired this pioneer of modernism, who drew on Cubism—especially the art of Léger and Picasso—to create his distinctly personal style.

THE EXAMPLE OF MILTON AVERY

More than Stuart Davis, however, Milton Avery was Gottlieb's mentor during the thirties. After meeting Avery in 1929, Gottlieb often visited him with Mark Rothko, first at the Averys' studio on Lincoln Square, then at 72nd Street, where they moved around 1930.[27] Gottlieb and Esther also saw the Averys during their summers outside New York. After the Averys were married in June 1926, they stayed in Rockport, Massachusetts, near the Averys in Gloucester and Rothko at Cape Ann. The following summer, when Rothko did not join them, they rented a place in East Gloucester, where they saw the Averys every day.

Gottlieb and Rothko were the core of a group of artists, including Paul Bodin, George Constant, Joe Solman, and Vincent Spagna, who gathered around Avery in New York and Gloucester. To Gottlieb and his friends, Avery and his art were inspiring, offering them encouragement and support during their formative years. "Avery was older than us," Solman said, "and his style was so well developed. We were all seeking the flat, and the exaggerated, and the expression in our own, very romantic, different ways. He had fulfilled it."[28]

Gottlieb admired Avery, as he had admired Davis, for being independent of realism, which dominated American painting at the time, and for being committed to modernism. Later he said in tribute to Avery:

> *I have always thought he was a great artist. When social realism and the American scene were considered the important thing, he took an esthetic stand opposed to regional subject matter. I shared his point of view; and since he was ten years my senior and an artist I respected, his attitude helped to reinforce me in my chosen direction. I always regarded him as a brilliant colorist and draftsman, a solitary figure working against the stream.*[29]

Avery's painting showed Gottlieb that the subjects closest to him—himself, his family, and his friends—were suitable themes for serious art. Before meeting Avery he had painted only a few portraits, such as *Aaron Siskind* (c. 1927, Illustration 4) and *Interior* (c. 1927 Illustration 5). But from 1929 through the mid-thirties, when he was closely associated with Avery, he took a special interest in portraiture, painting his wife in *Esther* (1931, Illustration 9), his father in *Untitled (Portrait of Emil)* (c. 1934, Illustration 11), and a friend in *Untitled (Max Margolis)* (c. 1935, Illustration 14).

Like Avery, Gottlieb revealed a genuine affection for his subjects, a feeling especially evident in his portraits of his wife. In *Esther* Gottlieb evoked a sense of serenity and warmth that echoes the placid mood in Avery's portraits of his wife Sally, as seen in *Mrs. Avery in a Checked Jacket* (1939, fig. 4). He also drew on Avery's stylistic method of distorting the figure, arbitrarily expanding his wife's shoulder in *Esther* to achieve a greater subjective expression. While Gottlieb also absorbed Avery's technique of thinly applying paint, his brushwork is more open, free, and impressionistic.

In other figural compositions of the thirties, Gottlieb alters the proportions of the human shape with a subtle sense of humor that echoes Avery's gentle, comic exaggerations of the figure in his works of the thirties. In *Man with Pigeons* (1932, Illustration 10) and *Seated Nude* (1934, Illustration 12) Gottlieb employs the Averyesque method of shrinking the head and magnifying the torso to create a droll, pyramidal figure. In these pictures Gottlieb also rhymes the figure's shape with other forms in the composition, comparing the stocky man with the corpulent pigeons, and the fleshy nude with the overstuffed chair. His satire is not biting; it shares Avery's attitude of amused detachment.

Instead of suggesting shapes with open brushwork, as in his previously discussed portrait of *Esther*, in these figural works he defines forms as closed color masses. For this greater distillation of form Gottlieb looked to Avery and to Avery's source, Matisse, whose art had been featured in 1931 in a retrospective show at The Museum of Modern Art. From them Gottlieb absorbed a preference for simplified form which he reflected in his increasingly condensed compositions of the early thirties, displaying greater assurance than his previous work.

Avery also had an impact on Gottlieb's landscape painting of this time. Like Avery, Gottlieb loved the sea and painted it many times in watercolor and oil during the summers he spent in Gloucester from 1933 to 1938. He adopted Avery's method of sketching outdoors; unfortunately, however, the drawings from this period in Gottlieb's collection were lost in the fire that destroyed his studio in 1966. From these sketches he would work in his studio, painting many of the same subjects as Avery such as scenes of Gloucester's seaside industry. In *Untitled (Gloucester Harbor Fisheries)* (c. 1933, fig. 5) he paints the small town's fisheries, with the harbor and boats in the distance, as had Avery the year before in *Harbor at Night* (1932, fig. 6). The combination of soft-edged color masses and incised lines in *Surf Casting* (c. 1935, Illustration 13) also points to Avery's influence, although Gottlieb's palette in this picture is darker than Avery's of the same period.

There is an inward mood in Gottlieb's work that is alien to Matisse and Avery. While Gottlieb was formally indebted to the Fauvist tradition, he did not share its untroubled view of the world. The Depression, which has no effect on Avery's gentle art of the early thirties, gives a melancholy tone to pictures such as *Man with Pigeons* (Illustration 10). Here Gottlieb contrasts swiftly converging space with flatly painted areas, first seen in *Brooklyn Bridge*, to create an ambiguous, dreamlike scene.

THE TEN, 1935–39

During the early thirties Gottlieb had a difficult time exhibiting his work, even though he had already had a one-man show in 1930 at the Dudensing Gallery. There were few galleries at that time that would represent a young artist. Through his friends Louis Harris and Rothko, he began showing at the Uptown Gallery at 249 West End Avenue, directed by Robert Ulrich Godsoe. Gottlieb and his friends were disappointed when Godsoe acquired a larger stable of artists. When he ignored their complaints, they withdrew from his gallery to form their own exhibiting group, "The Ten."

Gottlieb was a founding member of The Ten, which had its first meeting in 1935 in Solman's studio on 15th Street and Second Avenue. Solman recalled that the original group consisted of Ben Zion, Ilya Bolotowsky, Gottlieb, Harris, Yankel Kufeld, Rothko, Solman, and Nahum Tschacbasov.[30] Though they were only nine in number, they planned to include a tenth member at a later date and so adopted the name, "The Ten." Critic Jerome Klein dubbed them the "Ten who are nine."[31] The Ten viewed themselves in the tradition of previous avant-garde movements, and most of the group also identified with the expressionist tradition. "We were allied to the broad stream of Expressionism," Solman said, referring to himself, Gottlieb and Rothko. "Design and subject matter had to be intermingled. Our feeling toward pictorial art was closer to the Fauves than the German Expressionists."[32] Indeed, their approach to composition was influenced by Fauvism filtered through Avery.

The Ten began showing their work in 1935 at the said Montross Gallery at 785 Fifth Avenue in an exhibition entitled T*he Ten: An Independent Group.* Critics immediately noted their expressionist tendencies. A *New York Times* reviewer criticized them for "needless obscurity" and "reasonless distortion."[33] Marshal E. Landgren, after noticing their art in the Montross show, included The Ten in the opening exhibition in January 1936, at his WPA-sponsored Municipal Art Gallery at 62 West 53rd Street. Gottlieb's *Seated Nude* (1934, Illustration 12) was the most controversial picture in the show.[34] In November 1936, The Ten had their first European exhibition at the Galerie Bonaparte in Paris, arranged for them by the dealer Joseph Brummer. The following month they had their second show at the Montross Gallery, including Lee Gatch instead of Tschacbasov. They received a negative review from Edward Alden Jewell, the *New York Times* critic who wrote: "Gottlieb and Rothko would later write in 1943,"[35] In 1937–38 their work was exhibited at the Passaddoit Gallery on E. 60th St. which brought them more recognition.

Although they exhibited together, The Ten had no aesthetic credo. The various members were united only in their opposition to realism, which they considered to be outmoded. They expressed this view in November 1938, in their exhibition at Bernard Bradden's Mercury Galleries at 4 East Eighth Street. "Our group decided cockily to challenge the hegemony of the Whitney Museum," Solman said.36 Thus, they titled the show, "The Ten: Whitney Dissenters." In the catalogue introduction The Ten voiced their contempt for American Scene painting. They charged that "the symbol of the silo is in the ascendant at our Whitney Museum" and objected to the museum's reputed equivalence of American painting and literal painting."[37]

Because The Ten shared no common style, the aesthetic differences among them contributed to their breakup in 1939. The core of the group, including Gottlieb, Harris, Rothko, and Solman, were expressionist in approach. But Schanker painted in a cubist style, and Bolotowsky, who had worked in a representational manner in the early thirties, turned to non-objective abstraction. This led Bolotowsky eventually to join the American Abstract Artists, a larger group of exclusively abstract painters which had formed in 1935 about the same time as The Ten.38 Gottlieb, however, did not join: not only did he not paint in the abstract style required for membership, but with his expressionist bias it is doubtful that he wanted to be a part of the group. As he and Rothko suggested in 1943 in their letter to *The New York Times*, they felt that non-objective painting lacked what they valued in art—a content of feeling.

During 1936–37, Gottlieb was exhibiting with The Ten, he was also working on the government-sponsored Federal Art Project in the Easel Division. This was a desirable assignment because he could work in his own studio, instead of in a Project workshop. But Gottlieb did not enjoy working on the Project and did not view it positively.[39] Because Esther worked, he was not totally dependent on the WTA like many other artists; he could afford an independent attitude.

But Gottlieb did become involved in artists' organizations in the mid-thirties. In 1936 he joined the Artists' Union, which promoted job programs on the Project. Gottlieb also was a founding member of the American Artists' Congress, headed by Stuart Davis.[40] Gottlieb supported the Congress, which defended the WPA's cultural projects, organized an exhibition in 1937 entitled "In Defense of World Democracy—Dedicated to the Peoples of Spain and China," arranged the New York showing of Picasso's Guernica in 1939, and sponsored the exhibition of modern art in 1939–40 at the New York World's Fair.

Clockwise from top left: Adolph Gottlieb, *Untitled (Young Girl In Chair)*, c. 1932. Crayon on paper. 12⅛" × 9½"; *Seated Woman*, c. 1929. Charcoal on paper, 12¼" × 9½"; *Esther at Easel*, 1937. Pencil on paper. 10⅞" x 8½"; *Esther*, 1931. Oil on canvas. 19" × 24" © 2025 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation

From top to bottom: Mark Rothko, *[Bathers on the beach]*, 1934. Watercolor on Construction paper. 15" × 14¼"; *[Bathers on the beach]*, 1934. Watercolor, graphite on Watercolor paper. 11¼" × 15¼"; *[Figures in a Landscape]*, 1938/1940. Watercolor on Construction paper. 12" × 18"

While Gottlieb participated in these organizations, he did not agree with the social realists who dominated their ruling boards. In principle, Gottlieb objected to political content in art. With others in The Ten he protested the social realists' control of the editorial policy of the Artists' Union magazine, *Art Front*.[41] Politics, however, did not play an important part in Gottlieb's life at this time. Although he attended a few Artists' Union meetings, he was not a political activist.[42]

THE IMPACT OF JOHN GRAHAM

As Gottlieb looked for an alternative to the expressionist style he had developed under Avery, he became increasingly interested in Cubism and Surrealism. In 1936 he saw two major exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art: Cubism and Abstract Art, which included Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism, de Stijl, and Purism; and Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism, which surveyed both Verist and Abstract Surrealism. Gottlieb was already familiar with Surrealism from exhibitions in the early thirties at the Julien Levy Gallery.

John Graham was the most important influence in fostering Gottlieb's interest in Surrealism. Unlike Avery, Graham was part of the European avant-garde. He had lived in Paris and knew prominent writers, such as Andre Breton and Andre Gide. Moreover, he continued to see these men and other artists on his excursions to Europe throughout the twenties and thirties. Upon his return Graham would inform Gottlieb, Davis and Smith of the latest developments in contemporary art, showing them his copies of Cahiers d'Art, containing illustrations of works by Leger, Gris, Ernst, Miro, Kandinsky, Picasso and others. Graham communicated his ideas to Gottlieb and his friends not only in discussions, but also in his book *System and Dialectics of Art* (1937). He gave Gottlieb an inscribed copy.[43]

Graham's influence was three-fold: First, he encouraged Gottlieb's interest in the late thirties in both Freud and Jung. Graham saw no conflict in their psychologies and freely combined them in *System and Dialects of Art* to support his assertion that the source of creativity is in the unconscious. Similarly, Gottlieb, who liked Graham's emphasis on the unconscious because he had long been interested in the imagination, later brought together aspects of Freud and Jung in his Pictographs of the forties.

Second, Graham fostered Gottlieb's interest in primitive art. Graham was a connoisseur of African sculpture and had assembled the Frank Crowninshield Collection; when Gottlieb began to collect primitive art, Graham advised him. In the spring of 1935, Gottlieb was impressed by the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, *African Negro Sculpture*. In the summer of 1935 he visited Paris with Esther and acquired several pieces of African sculpture from dealers suggested by Graham.[44] Like Graham, Gottlieb also appreciated Egyptian, Pre-Columbian, and American Indian art, which he saw in exhibitions in the late thirties and early forties. From Graham he inherited the belief in the unconscious expression in primitive art, and it is this sense of this unconscious which Gottlieb echoes in the primitivistic forms in the Pictographs.

Third, Graham supported Gottlieb's fascination with both Cubism and Surrealism. Graham fused ideas from both traditions in *System and Dialectics* in his statement that "art is a subjective point of view expressed in objective terms.[45] In this spirit of synthesis, Gottlieb later combines in his Pictographs aspects of Cubism and Surrealism and primitive and modern art.

Although Gottlieb absorbed these ideas from Graham in 1936–37, he did not reflect them in his art of that time. The influence of Avery is still seen in the diffuse color forms of Luxembourg Gardens (Illustration 15), which Gottlieb painted c.1936 in New York from sketches he had made in Paris during his two-month trip to Europe in 1935. As long as he continued to paint near Avery, it was difficult to break away. Indeed, it was not until he was physically separated from Avery for eight months in Arizona in 1937 and 1938 that he found his own direction in art.

ARIZONA, 1937–38

Because Esther had been advised by her doctor to go to a dry climate to improve her health, she and Gottlieb spent the winter and spring of 1937–38 in Arizona. They settled in Tucson on the outskirts of town in a small house, which they liked for its spectacular view of the desert, ringed by the Santa Catalina mountains. Gottlieb was immediately struck by the starkness of the desert landscape, which contrasted dramatically with the lush foliage of Vermont, where he and Esther had spent the previous summer with the Averys. "I think the emotional feeling I had on the desert was that it was like being at sea," Gottlieb said. "In fact, when you're out on the desert, you see the horizon for 360° ... so that the desert is like the ocean in that sense."[46]

In December Gottlieb began painting the desert landscape. But he was not happy with his first attempts, so he returned to painting from sketches he had made in Vermont. Yet he soon reached an impasse with these, too, as they had nothing to do with his experience in the desert. Frustrated, he dropped landscape painting and turned to still life. In December he began painting arrangements of objects in the studio, beginning with his chessboard and chessmen. Encouraged with the results, at the beginning of January, he began painting still lifes on a larger scale.[47]

In one of these works, *Untitled (Pink Still Life-Curtain and Gourds)* (1938, Illustration 20), Gottlieb combines chess pieces with cut-open vegetables (persimmons, avocados, and gourds) that he and Esther found at the market. The flattened style of this and other still lifes of this period suggests the continued influence of Avery. But Gottlieb thought of these still lifes as "studio painting" in the tradition of Cezanne.48 Indeed, his simplified compositions of objects on a table against a wall were probably inspired by Cezanne's still lifes, which he had seen at The Metropolitan Museum. But in these works Gottlieb goes beyond Cezanne in radically flattening the space. In tilting the table top so that its edges are parallel with the picture plane Gottlieb recalls instead Matisse still of the twenties. Gottlieb also may have been inspired by Picasso's synthetic cubist still lifes, which he had recently seen in Cubism and Abstract Art. Like Picasso he flattens forms into semi-geometric shapes, but he does not maintain a two-dimensional space. As seen in the meeting of the chessboard and gourd, Gottlieb contrasts plane with volume to produce an ambivalent space.

Gottlieb continues to develop this kind of condensed composition in related still lifes, such as *Untitled (Green Still Life-Gourds)* (1938, Illustration 21). Though he still suggests volume in shadows around the gourds, he gives them no sense of dimension in themselves, painting shadows as flat shapes. Here the simple, horizontal division of the background is a precursor to the design of his Imaginary Landscapes of the fifties.

The subdued palette of these still lifes—dusty browns, pinks and greens—echoes the muted tones of the desert. With these shades Gottlieb produced subtly textured surfaces. He applied paint in layers—light, sandy tints over dark, brown shades and vice versa—allowing colors to sound through each other. He also left brushstrokes from previous layers of paint visible. This technique of stratifying color reappears throughout his later art.

In other still lifes of this period Gottlieb paints in a more illusionistic style. Although he employs the same format in *Untitled (Still Life-Landscape in Window)* (1938, Illustration 21) as in the flattened still lifes, he includes, instead of a wall or curtain, a window view of the mountains outside their house. The strange space of Gottlieb's vista—at once far and near—echoes his own experience of the desert's unreal atmosphere, and in its dream-like quality is distinctly Surrealist. In Symbols and the Desert (1937–38, Illustration 23) he creates a feeling of stopped time, doubtless inspired by Dali, which resurfaces later in 1939–40 in the magic realist still lifes Gottlieb painted in Gloucester.

Although Gottlieb had admired Dali's paintings in New York, it was the bizarre, open space of the Arizona desert that led him to incorporate aspects of Surrealism in his own art. Yet because of his preference for painterly edges, which he had developed under Sloan and Avery, Gottlieb never adopted a trompe l'oeil style. Nonetheless, from Surrealism he adopted a more symbolic approach to subject matter. Instead of painting an entire landscape, he uses fragments of desert life in these works to represent the desert as a whole. In particular, he focuses on the detritus of the arid land-petrified wood, dried cacti, and parched bones-to evoke a sense of the desert's mysterious age.

The influence of Avery is still felt in several of Gottlieb's Arizona works, such as *The Swimming Hole*, *Untitled (Portrait-Blue Bandana)*, and *Untitled (Self Portrait in Mirror)* (1937–38, Illustrations 16, 18, and 19). But it was the isolation of painting in Arizona that gave him the freedom to develop a new direction, away from the example of Avery. In the Arizona still lifes Gottlieb develops a method of working in a series, establishing a basic compositional format and exploring variations on it in related pictures. This method is important since Gottlieb continued to employ it throughout his later work in the Pictographs, the Imaginary Landscapes, the Unstill Lifes, and the Bursts.

In March 1938, Gottlieb stopped working on still life and turned to landscape and figural compositions. Such works as *Circus Girl* and *Circus Performers* (Illustrations 24 and 25) were inspired by a visiting carnival; however, these are also imaginary scenes in the tradition of his earlier works, *The Wasteland* and *Man with Pigeons*. These pictures display a similarly haunting, inward mood, expressed in the figures' frozen poses and self-absorbed expressions.

While Gottlieb enjoyed living in the desert, he felt culturally isolated there. The only art of interest to him in Arizona was the ancient Southwest Indian art in the State Museum in Tucson.49 Although Gottlieb did not reflect his interest in Indian art in his painting in Arizona, he did acquire a knowledge of its forms and colors, which he later recalled in the Pictographs.

NEW YORK, 1939–1940

Gottlieb and Esther had planned to stay in Arizona through the summer, but they missed New York and so returned early. In June they drove back to East Gloucester, Massachusetts, where they spent the rest of the summer by the sea. In the fall they returned to New York, settling in Brooklyn Heights. They moved into an historic townhouse at 121 Joralemon Street, formerly the home of Hamilton Fish, where they set up both an apartment and a studio.

Gottlieb resumed his life in New York, but things had changed. He was no longer Avery's young admirer, but an artist with ideas of his own. Although Avery disapproved, he continued to be interested in Surrealism—especially the art of Dali, which he surely saw exhibited in the spring of 1939 at the Julien Levy Gallery. He knew that Verist Surrealism contradicted the painterly tradition Avery stood for and to which he also belonged, but he understood that to oppose Avery was the only way to find himself.

By 1940 Gottlieb no doubt also sensed that the times were different. The artists' organizations he had known during the Depression were no longer viable: the small Artists' Union had been swallowed by big labor—the AFL and the CIO—and the WPA had been cut back by a reactionary Congress attempting to purge what it perceived as dangerous leftist elements. In the spring of 1940 these forces of change were focused in Gottlieb's own life as he was pulled into the breakup of the Artists' Congress.

Initially Gottlieb had been enthusiastic about the democratic ideals of the Congress, but like other artists, over the years he had lost interest in the Congress because it did not further his career. Yet it was a series of events in 1939, at the beginning of World War II, that eventually led to the dissolution of the Congress. Many artists who had been sympathetic to the left were disillusioned by reports of the purge trials in the Soviet Union and were shocked by the Hitler-Stalin nonaggression pact of August 23, 1939. The Russian invasion of Finland in December, however, finally revealed the aggressive, totalitarian character of the Stalinist regime, destroying whatever interest these artists had in "the Russian experiment."[50] These events, which rocked the world, moved Gottlieb from political indifference to conviction.

The invasion of Finland caused a deep rift in the Congress between members who wanted to protest it and those who did not. Gottlieb, who was against the invasion, joined a dissident group centered around art historian Meyer Schapiro. In a petition read by member Ralph Pearson at the April 4 meeting, Schapiro's group challenged the Congress "to make clear to the world whether the Congress is a remnant of the cultural front of the Communist Party or an independent artists organization."51 Gottlieb signed this statement along with Milton Avery, Peggy Bacon, George Biddle, Ilya Bolotowsky, Jose de Creeft, Morris Davidson, Dorothy Eisner, Paula Elisoph, Hans Foy, Louis Harris, Renee Lahm, Paul Mommer, Lewis Mumford, Ralph Rosenborg, and Mark Rothko. At this meeting, Schapiro spoke out against the Lynd Ward report that did not condemn the Russian invasion of Finland, but he was unable to garner enough votes to defeat it. As a result, Schapiro encouraged artists to protest by resigning from the Congress.[52]

Gottlieb and the Schapiro group publicly resigned from the Congress on April 17, 1940. Although the Congress officially lasted until 1942, the secession of this group effectively destroyed it. The disintegration of this artists' organization marked the end of an era of idealism which had begun in the early days of the Depression. By 1940, the situation of the artist had not changed, but the world had. The humanitarian ideals of Socialism had been replaced by the totalitarian reality of Communism.

Reaffirming the need for a non-political alliance of artists, Gottlieb and the dissident group around Schapiro formed a new organization entitled The Federation of Modem Painters and Sculptors. Unlike the Congress, the Federation was solely devoted to exhibiting the work of its members. Gottlieb helped found this group and served subsequently as a Vice-President in 1942 and as its President in 1944–45. With 62 members by 1942, the Federation was dedicated to promoting "the welfare of free progressive art in America."[53]

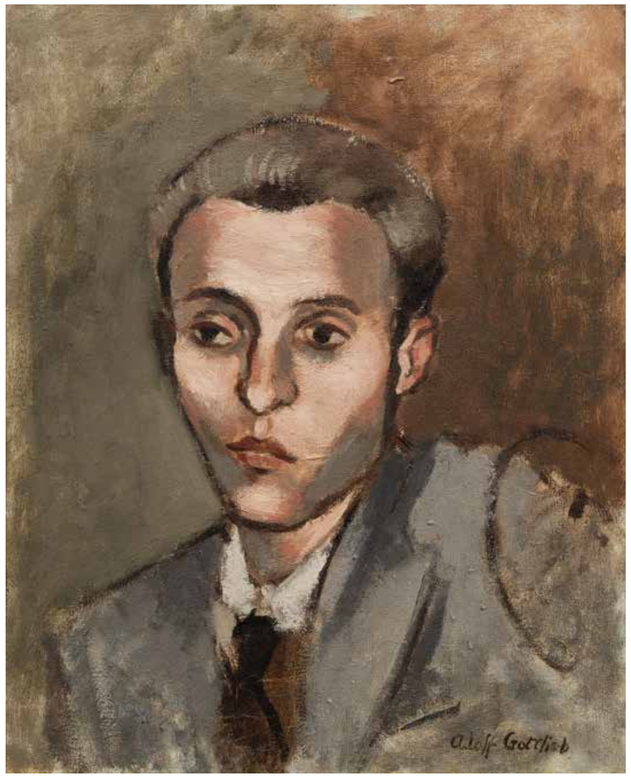
During 1939–40 Gottlieb's circle of friends in Brooklyn Heights also broke up. In 1940 David Smith and Dorothy Dehner moved to Bolton Landing, where they had been spending part of the year since buying a farm there in 1929. About the same time, Graham formed a new circle of friends, including Pollock, Newman, Hedda Sterne, Fritz Bultman, Corrado Marcarelli, and Theodoros Stamos. Gottlieb stayed in Brooklyn Heights and did not join this circle. Of these artists, he was friendly only with Newman; he did not meet Pollock until the mid-forties.

At the same time Gottlieb drifted away from The Ten, exhibiting with them for the last time at the Bonestell Gallery in 1939. The Ten had served its purpose in providing regular exhibitions; now galleries were approaching several of its members for individual shows. In April 1940, during the same days as the Artists' Congress crisis, Gottlieb had a one-man show at Hugh Stix's Artists' Gallery. When friends in The Ten saw the Arizona pictures he exhibited there, they were perplexed by the new, more abstract direction he had taken in his art.

THE INFLUENCE OF SURREALISM, 1939–40

In New York Gottlieb continued to paint still lifes, such as *Still Life-Alarm Clock* (1938, Illustration 26) and *Untitled (Cactus Still Life, New York)* (1939, Illustration 27), in the flattened style of his Arizona works. But beginning in the summer of 1939 in East Gloucester he focused on still lifes of sea objects in a more illu-

Adolph Gottlieb, *Aaron Siskind*, c. 1927. Oil on canvas. 27" × 19⅞" © 2025 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation



From top to bottom: Adolph Gottlieb *Tom Nagai*, c. 1934.
Oil on canvas. 23¾" × 18⅜"; *Untitled (Portrait Young Man)*, 1925.
Oil on canvas. 20" × 16" © 2025 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation

sionistic style influenced by Verist Surrealism. It is not surprising that during this time of escalating world war, Gottlieb was drawn to the irrationality of the Surrealist dream world. As the German *wehrmacht* swept across Europe, spreading violence and death, Surrealism's dark view of man's psyche made more sense than Avery's serene outlook on the world. The reality of the war was brought home when, between 1939 and 1941, the Surrealists themselves, including Breton, Dali, Matta, Masson, and Seligmann, fled Europe to live in exile in the United States. Their presence in New York brought Surrealism to the forefront of the art world.

Although Gottlieb had been interested in Surrealism for several years, it was in 1939–40 that he clearly incorporated it in his work. He was first impressed by the work of de Chirico and Dali, which were then being exhibited in New York.[54] In *Picnic (Box and Figure)* (1939–40, Illustration 28) Gottlieb recalls de Chirico's metaphysical painting in his creation of an unreal space with a rectangular box in an empty landscape. Gottlieb's mannikin figures derive directly from de Chirico's work of 1915–17, such as *The Duo* (1915, fig. 7). The ghostly bridge in the background of Gottlieb's picture echoes his earlier imaginary scene, *Brooklyn Bridge*. But here it is the structure of the box rather than the bridge that creates a sense of psychological tension. Yet Gottlieb's contrast of this compressed space with the open vista of the background remains unresolved.

In *Untitled (Boxes on Beach and Figure)* (1939–40, Illustration 29) Gottlieb avoids this spatial dilemma by emphasizing a deep space in which forms gradually diminish toward the horizon. Again he uses the box motif in a bleak landscape, but he transforms the box, inspired by fishing crates near the beach, into sinister, coffinlike containers. His allusion to death, enhanced by the mysterious figure at the right and the dark palette of browns and grays, perhaps reflects his feelings during this time of widening war.

Gottlieb pursues the theme of spatial dichotomy in *Untitled (Box and Sea Objects)* (1939–40, Illustration 30), again contrasting forms seen at close vantage point with a faraway horizon. He omits the figure, however, and fills the compartmented box with objects from the sea—shells, seaweed, and driftwood. As he had used pieces of cacti to suggest the desert in his Arizona still lifes, here he employs these oceanic fragments lo evoke the sea. The wide-open space of the sea reminded him of the desert, as the desert had earlier recalled the sea. His arrangement of the box against a remote sea and sky suggests the example of Dali's *Illumined Pleasures* (1929, fig. 8), which was exhibited in 1936 at the Museum of Modem Art.[55] Like Dali, Gottlieb creates a sense of mystery through the disjunction of the illogical, irregular shapes of its contents. But Gottlieb does not fill his box with frenetic nightmare scenes; instead he uses solitary objects from nature whose forms are in themselves evocative. His style is also more painterly than Dali's and his space is flatter.

To reduce a sense of recession Gottlieb also paints the box frontally and buries its interior perspective lines in shadow. For the first time he simplifies the composition to one box with multiple compartments, which was suggested by a slotted, wooden bottle crate he had seen on the beach in Gloucester. This kind of box also points to Gottlieb's awareness of Joseph Cornell's works, such as *Soap Bubble Set* (1936, fig. 9), which in 1936 had been exhibited in *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* and illustrated in Julien Levy's book, *Surrealism*. But Gottlieb takes a different approach to the box than Cornell, working in two instead of three dimensions. Whereas Cornell evokes a magical mood through the recurrence of similar motifs among dissimilar objects, Gottlieb creates a sense of mystery through the contrast of disparate, strange shapes among related, familiar objects.

In *Box and Sea Objects* Gottlieb creates Surrealist-inspired metamorphic images, making the driftwood at the top of the box look like a human head. He also gives objects sexual innuendos: whereas the shape of the open, oval shell at the upper left appears vaginal, that of the sharp, pointed shell at the lower right is phallic. This sexual imagery, revealing his interest in the later thirties in Freud, resurfaces in more abstract form in his Pictographs of the forties.

NOTES

This essay is based on a section or my 1980 dissertation, presented to Columbia University. Entitled "The Painting of Adolph Gottlieb, 1903–1974." I would like to thank deeply Mrs. Adolph Gottlieb and Mr. Sanford Hirsch, Administrator of the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, for their generous assistance. Thanks also go to Professor Theodore Reff for his encouragement of the project.

I would like to say a word about the general terms used in this essay. None of the labels traditionally applied to the art of Gottlieb and his colleagues is wholly satisfactory. "Abstract Expressionism," coined in 1951 by critic Robert Coates, is lite best known stylistic label. Through it correctly suggests the dual influences of abstraction and Expressionism, it does not acknowledge Surrealism, which exerted an equally powerful force on their art. Another stylistic label is "Action Painting," invented in 1952 by critic Harold Rosenberg, who adapted the vocabulary of Existentialism to stress the process over the form or content of this art. "Action Painting" was used broadly by writers, but it correctly applies only to painting in which the artist's gesture is primary. Even then the term overemphasizes the spontaneity of this art and undervalues its thoughtful elements and subjective content. "American-Type Painting." proposed in 1955 by critic Clement Greenberg, does not as a label distinguish this art from any other American painting. A more specific geographical term is "The New York School," suggested by Robert Motherwell in 1951. "The New York School" identifies the center of these artists' activities, but it says nothing of their styles, nor does it separate them from those of younger artists who also rose to prominence in New York. Clearly, "Abstract Expressionism" and "The New York School" are inaccurate labels, but they have been adopted commonly by historians and critics, so they will be used in this essay.

1 Letter from Mrs. Edwin London (Rhoda Gottlieb), March 4, 1977.
2 Registrar's records at The Art Students' League, New York, list Gottlieb's address in 1920–21 as 1228 Grand Concourse; in 1923–24 as 2295 Grand Concourse; and in 1926 as 285 Riverside Drive, New York City.
3 Gottlieb, quoted in John Gruen, *The Party's Over Now: Reminiscences of the Fifties* (New York: The Viking Press, 1967), p. 254. Because of his birthplace, Gottlieb called himself "the original Tenth Street artist" (*Ibid.*) He refers to Tenth Street during the fifties, which was a center of artists' studios, cooperative galleries, the Club and the Cedar Tavern, where artists gathered. Actually, though Gottlieb frequented the Club, he remained aloof from this community where many younger artists followed the style of Willem de Kooning.
4 Dorothy Seckler, Interview with Adolph Gottlieb, New York, October 25, 1967, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., p. 2.
5 Registrar's records, The Art Students' League, Parsons School of Design, and Cooper Union, New York.
6 Hamilton Easter Field, *The Technique of Oil Painting and Other Essays* (Brooklyn, New York: Ardsley, 1913). During the twenties Field was editor and publisher of *The Arts* magazine.
7 Seckler, Interview, p. 9.
8 John Sloan, Gist of Art: *Principles and Practice Expounded in the Classroom and Studio* (New York: American Artists Group, 1939), p. 83.
9 Seckler, Interview, p. 4. "I went to the Louvre every day almost for six straight months," Gottlieb said. "And this was very valuable." Martin Friedman, An Interview with Adolph Gottlieb, New York, August 1962 (unpublished typescript), Tape 1B, p. 4.
10 Gottlieb recalled, "I was tremendously impressed; I took it all like a duck to water. Seckler, Interview, p. 4.
11 *Ibid.*, p. 5. Although Thornton Wilder was also staying at Gottlieb's pension, he did not make his acquaintance.
12 *Ibid.* In Vienna and Munich Gottlieb was drawn to the art of Titian, Tintoretto, and El Greco. He was also fascinated by German Expressionism, which he would continue to see in New York in the 1930s in exhibitions at the J.B. Neumann Gallery.
13 In 1959 William Rubin noted Gottlieb's identification with the modern tradition: "Here is a painter in whom the assimilation of the most viable qualities of the European tradition is immediately evident. The sophistication of Gottlieb's art, his transformation of the means of European painting to serve the purposes of his own personal vision—rather than needlessly jettisoning this inheritance out of fear of seeming less American or, on the other hand, retaining its more seductive aspects when they would have compromised his goals—these point to in unself-conscious independence that impresses one in the man and his work." Adolph Gottlieb." *Art International*, 3, Nos. 3–4 (March 1959), p. 35.
14 Conversation with Annalee Newman, New York, July 29, 1976. Mrs. Newman said, "Barnett met Adolph when he was seven-teen, in 1922. Adolph considered himself an artist, whereas Barnett was still a young kid."
15 *Portrait and Nude Model* were dated 1921 in Miriam Robert, *Adolph Gottlieb: Paintings, 1921–56*, exhib. cat. (The Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, 1978). Since Gottlieb had taken only Sloan's Illustration class by 1921, he probably painted these in 1923 when he had enrolled in the painting class All works before 1941 not dated in Gottlieb's hand are given "circa" dates. These dates were assigned by Esther Gottlieb, Sanford Hirsch, and me on the basis of stylistic considerations. Some dates were also taken from exhibition listings and catalogues of the period. Works from 1941–74 are dated according to consecutive records Adolph and Esther Gottlieb kept at the time he produced the works.
16 Seckler, Interview, p. 3. "When you draw, your intuition is a sort of guide," Sloan advised. "You must have a preconception in your mind and your hand puts down this concept as if guided invisibly." *Gist of Art*, p. 56.
17 Miriam Roberts in *Adolph Gottlieb: Paintings 1921–56* briefly discusses Gottlieb's early work. Other literature does not analyze his pictures of the twenties and thirties, except for isolated examples. See Martin Friedman, *Adolph Gottlieb*, exhib. cat. (The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1963), Robert Doty and Diane Waldman, *Adolph Gottlieb*, exhib. cat. (The Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1968), Harry Rand, "Adolph Gottlieb in Context," *Art Magazine*, 51, No. 5 (February 1977), pp. 112–136, and Karen Wilkin, *Adolph Gottlieb: Pictographs*, exhib. cat. (The Edmonton Art Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta, 1977).
18 Seckler, Interview, p. 6.
19 Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Cézanne, Gaugin, Seurat, Van Gogh* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1929), Aaron Siskind, a close friend of Gottlieb, said "when we were in school, Gottlieb's god was Cézanne." Telephone conversation with Aaron Siskind, March 24, 1977.
20 Anon. Review, *The New York Times*, January 20, 1929.
21 John Jones, Interview with Adolph Gottlieb, November 3, 1965. New York, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, p. 6. Gottlieb shared an interest in modern literature with Newman, Siskind, Max Margolis (whose portrait he painted in c. 1935, Illustration 14), and Leo Yamin, who together formed a literary society at City College in New York entitled *Clionia*. Though Gottlieb was never an official member of this group, he often discussed books with these friends.
22 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
23 Sanford Hirsch brought my attention to Gottlieb's technique of haloing forms in his early works.
24 Conversation with Esther Gottlieb, September 16, 1976.
25 Conversation with Esther Gottlieb, New York, February 22, 1978.
26 This circle of friendship is documented in an etching of 1933 entitled *Portraits of Adolph Gottlieb, Esther Dick Gottlieb, Edgar Levy, Lucille Corcos Levy, David Smith, and Dorothy Dehner Smith* (Private Collection). For this group portrait, made one evening in the fall of 1933 in the Levy's apartment, each of the six drew lots to choose their subject, then etched a section of the plate. Gottlieb printed a proof on his etching press.
27 Conversation with Sally Avery, Woodstock, New York, June 26, 1976. Gottlieb, Rothko and Newman also participated in a sketching group that met in the mid-thirties in Avery's studio.
28 Interview with Joe Solman, New York, July 9 1976.
29 Gottlieb, statement in Charlotte Willard, "In the Art Galleries," *New York Post*, January 10, 1965, p. 20.
30 Interview with Solman, July 9, 1976. My discussion of The Ten is based on Joe Solman's account of the group in "The Special Division of the WPA Federal Art Project," in *New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology*, M. Nemser, ed., Francis V. O'Connor (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972), pp. 115–130, in addition to an interview with Ilya Bolotowsky, New York, May 4, 1977.
31 Jerome Klein, "Ten Who Are Nine Return for Second Annual Exhibition," *New York Sun*, December 19, 1936.
32 Interview with Solman, July 9, 1976.
33 Anon. Review, *The New York Times*, December 22, 1935.
34 Earl Sparling, "Workmen See Little Art in the Municipal Gallery," *New York World Telegram*, January 6, 1936. Sparling said, "Workmen busied today to get the temporary Municipal Art Gallery at 62 West 53rd Street into official inspection shape for Mayor La Guardia and other city officials. A whole crew was directed to attract the attention of the workmen as a 'Sitting Nude' by Adolph Gottlieb. . . 'No, one won't like it,' said one of the workmen. 'Why couldn't he have painted a good looking dame.'"
35 Edward Alden Jewell, "Review," *The New York Times*, December 20, 1936, p. 11. "I do not believe I understand the American 'expressionists' use very well.
36 Solman, "The Special Division," p. 128.
37 Foreword to *The Ten: Whitney Dissenters*, exh. cat. (Newberry Galleries, New York, 1938), n.p.
38 For an account of the formation and activities of the American Abstract Artists, see Susan C. Larsen, "The American Abstract Artists," *Art Journal, 14, The Archives of American Art Journal*, 14, no. 1 (1974), pp. 7–21.
39 Gottlieb, statement in "Questions for Artists Employed on the WPA Federal Art Project in New York City and State," New Deal Research Project (Director: Francis V. O'Connor), March 5, 1968, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, p. 3.
40 For a history of the Congress, see Gerald Monroe, "The American Artists' Congress and the Invasion of Finland," *Archives of American Art Journal*, 15, No. 1 (1975), p. 16. Gottlieb was one of the signers of the original call for the Congress. See American Artists' Congress Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
41 In a letter to Harold Baumbach from Arizona, March 1, 1938, Gottlieb objected: "I thought the Union policy was to adopt no aesthetic platform. Yet as a Union organ the *Art Front* seems to repudiate only a certain type of painting, that with a so-called social slant."
42 Dorothy Dehner recalled that Gottlieb "was less politically involved than Smith, Levy, Graham and other artists he knew at that time." Letter from Dorothy Dehner, November 25, 1979. Esther Gottlieb also said that Gottlieb was not "very active politically" during the thirties. Conversation, February 22, 1978.
43 John Graham, *System and Dialectics of Art* (New York: Delphic Studios, 1937). Inscribed: "To Esther and Adolph, Graham." On p. 75 Graham added Gottlieb's name in pen in the margin to his list of "outstanding American painters: Matulka, Avery, (Adolph Gottlieb 'amended by the author'), Stuart Davis, Max Weber, David Smith, Willem de Kooning, Edgar Levy . . . Some are just as good and some are better than the leading artists of the same generation in Europe."
44 Conversation with Esther Gottlieb, September 25, 1976. Graham also introduced David Smith and Dorothy Dehner to African Art dealers during their trip to Paris in the fall of 1935. Conversation with Dorothy Dehner, March 10, 1977.
45 Graham, *System and Dialectics* (1937), p. 51. Gottlieb also read *Cahiers d'Art*. He said, "Before the war, the French periodical *Cahiers d'Art* was the dominant source of European influence," quoted in Francis Celentano, "The Origins and Development of Abstract Expressionism in the United States," unpublished Master's Thesis, New York University, 1957, appendix.
46 Friedman, Interview with Adolph Gottlieb, Tape 1B, p. 14.
47 Gottlieb, Letter to Harold Baumbach, December 12, 1937, January 3, 1938. Gottlieb's correspondence to Baumbach and to Paul Bodin during his eight-month stay in Tucson provides the 1937–38 dates for Gottlieb's Arizona works.
48 Gottlieb, Letter to Baumbach, January 18, 1938.
49 Gottlieb, Letter to Paul Bodin, March 3, 1938.
50 Gerald Monroe, "The American Artists' Congress and the Invasion of Finland," p. 14. My account of the breakup of the Congress is based on Monroe's history and the American Artists' Congress papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
51 *Ibid.*, p. 17. The executive board of the Congress did not respond to an appeal for help from the Hoover Committee for Finnish Relief. Ralph Pearson, a founding member of the Congress, who objected to the Communists' control of the board, pressured Stuart Davis to have the board vote on the issue of Finland. After delaying as long as possible, the board finally had Lynd Ward prepare a report, not binding on the board, for presentation at the April 4, 1940 membership meeting. Under the guise of advocating neutrality, the Ward report did not criticize Russia's take-over of Finland.
52 *Ibid.*, p. 18. Stuart Davis announced his resignation in the New York newspapers on April 8, 1940, followed by Lewis Mumford. In *The New Republic* of April 29, 1940, Mumford criticized liberals, who had previously supported the Communist Party's "popular front" against fascism, for maintaining a silence on Russia's non-aggressive pact with Germany. Mumford saw this as a "covert defense of Hitlerism."
53 *Ibid.*, p. 19. Gottlieb was present at the organizational meeting of the Federation on November 1, 1940 at Morris Davidson's studio. Gottlieb was active on several Federation committees from 1940 to 1953, when he resigned. See Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors, Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
54 De Chirico's work was exhibited in New York at the Julien Levy Gallery in *De Chirico, Paintings and Gouaches* (October 29–November 17, 1936) and at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in *De Chirico* (October 22–November 23, 1940) and (December 1, 1940–January 25, 1941).
55 *Illuminated Pleasures* (1929) appeared in *Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism* (1936, no. 130). Harry Rand illustrates *Illuminated Pleasures* in his article on Gottlieb, but he denies Dali's influence on him. Rand said Dali's "depictive content and reality would have been abhorrent to many American artists. Certainly Gottlieb was not attracted to such manipulations." ("Adolph Gottlieb in Context," *Arts*, p. 113). But Gottlieb was definitely influenced by Dali in his still lifes of 1939–40, which echo Dali's contrast of an emotionally charged imagery with a neutral setting.

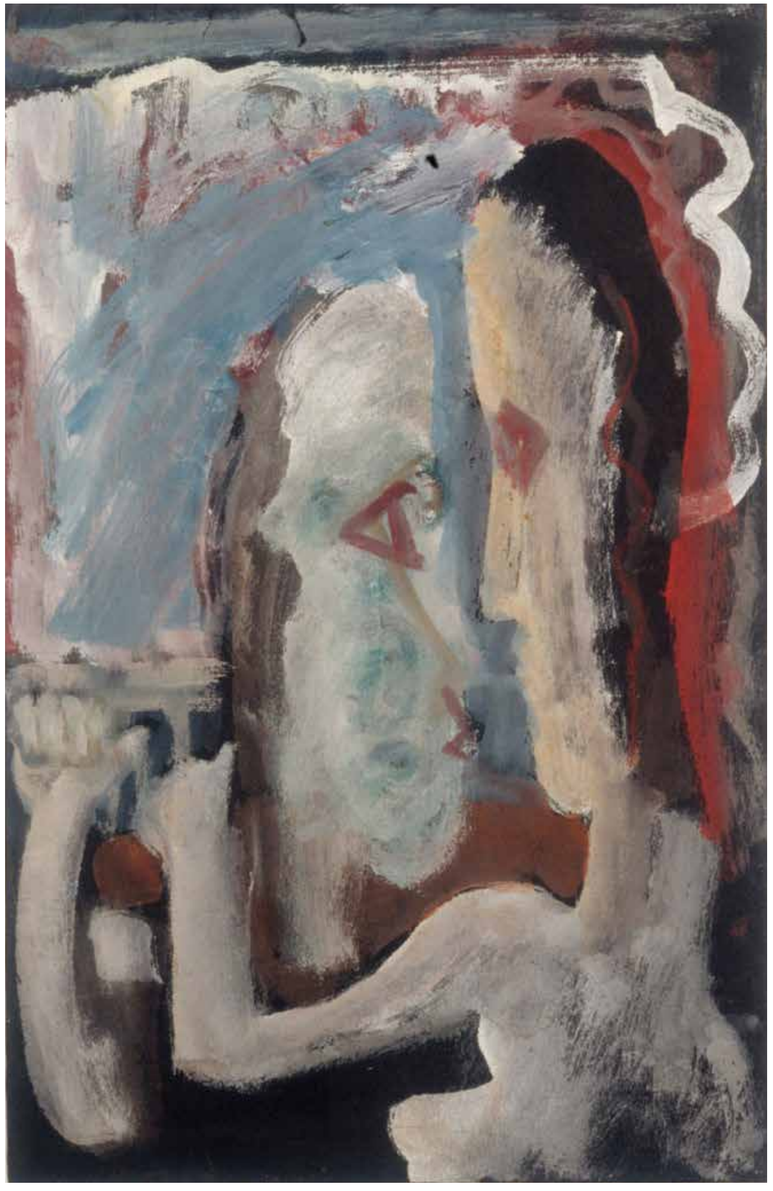
Lawrence Alloway acknowledged the impact of Versil Surrealism on Gottlieb's works of this period, comparing them with "object pictures like *Pierre Roy's*." (See Melpomene and Graffiti, *Art International*, 12 (April 1968), p. 21. Pierre Roy's *Electric Interior* at the Courtauld (Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford), which Gottlieb could have remembered from *Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism* (no. 524), similarly focuses on compartmentalized objects on a bench.

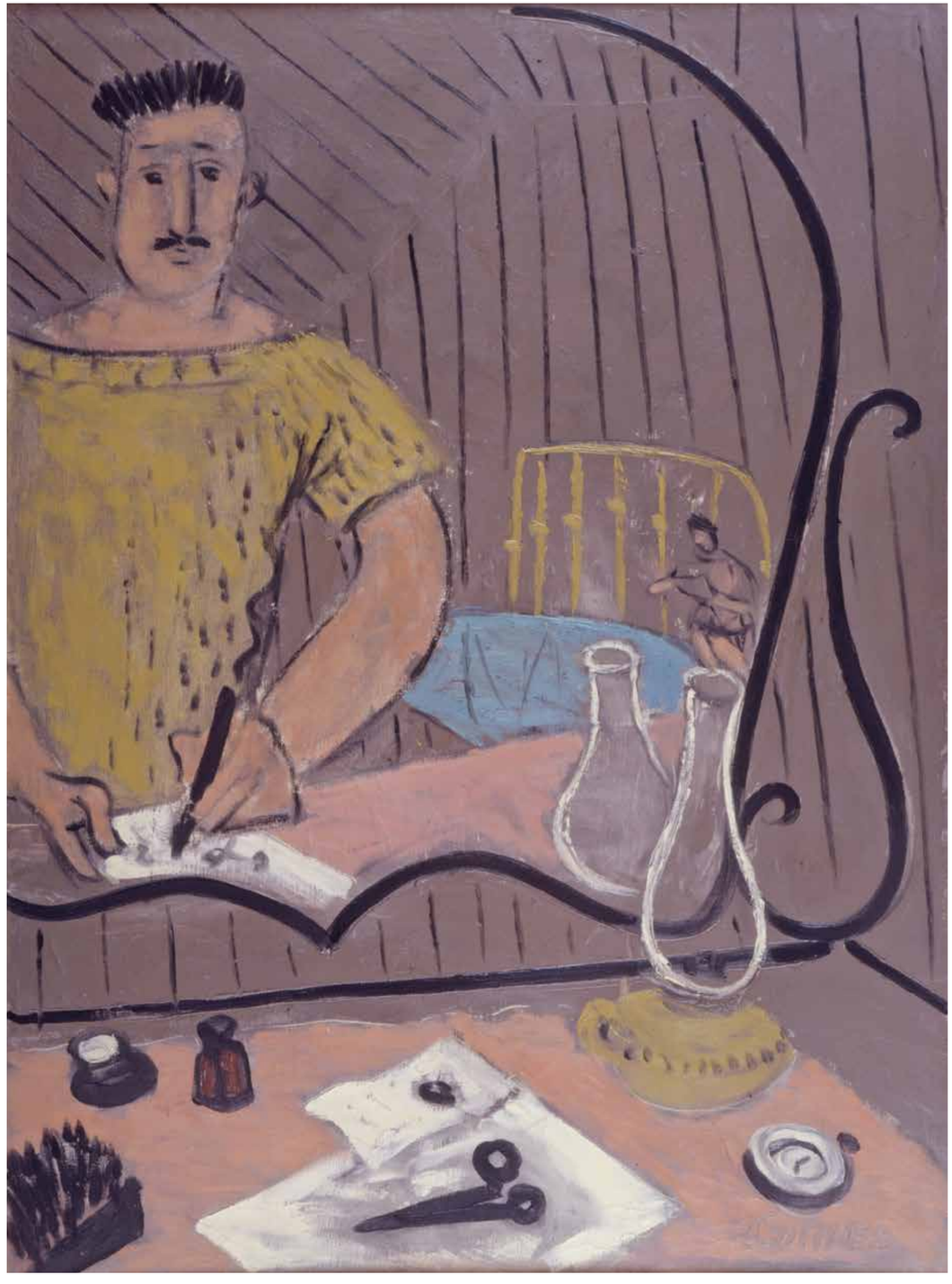
Adolph Gottlieb, *Portrait of Esther*, 1937. Gouache on construction paper 11⅛" × 9" © 2025 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation

Adolph Gottlieb, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1923. Pencil on paper. 10⅞" × 6⅞" © 2025 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation

Mark Rothko, *[Seated Man]*, 1932/1933. Watercolor on Linen-finish bond paper. 10" × 8"; *[Seated man reading]*, 1932/1933. Watercolor on Linen-finish bond paper. 10" × 8" © 2025 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Mark Rothko, *Untitled [Standing Man and Woman]*, 1938. Oil on canvas. 50" × 37"
© 1998 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York





Mark Rothko, *[Couple]*, 1936/1937. Watercolor on Construction paper. 12¼" × 7¹³⁄₁₆" © 2025 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; *Untitled (William and Rose Sachar)*, 1936/1937. Oil on canvas. 20" × 12" © 1998 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

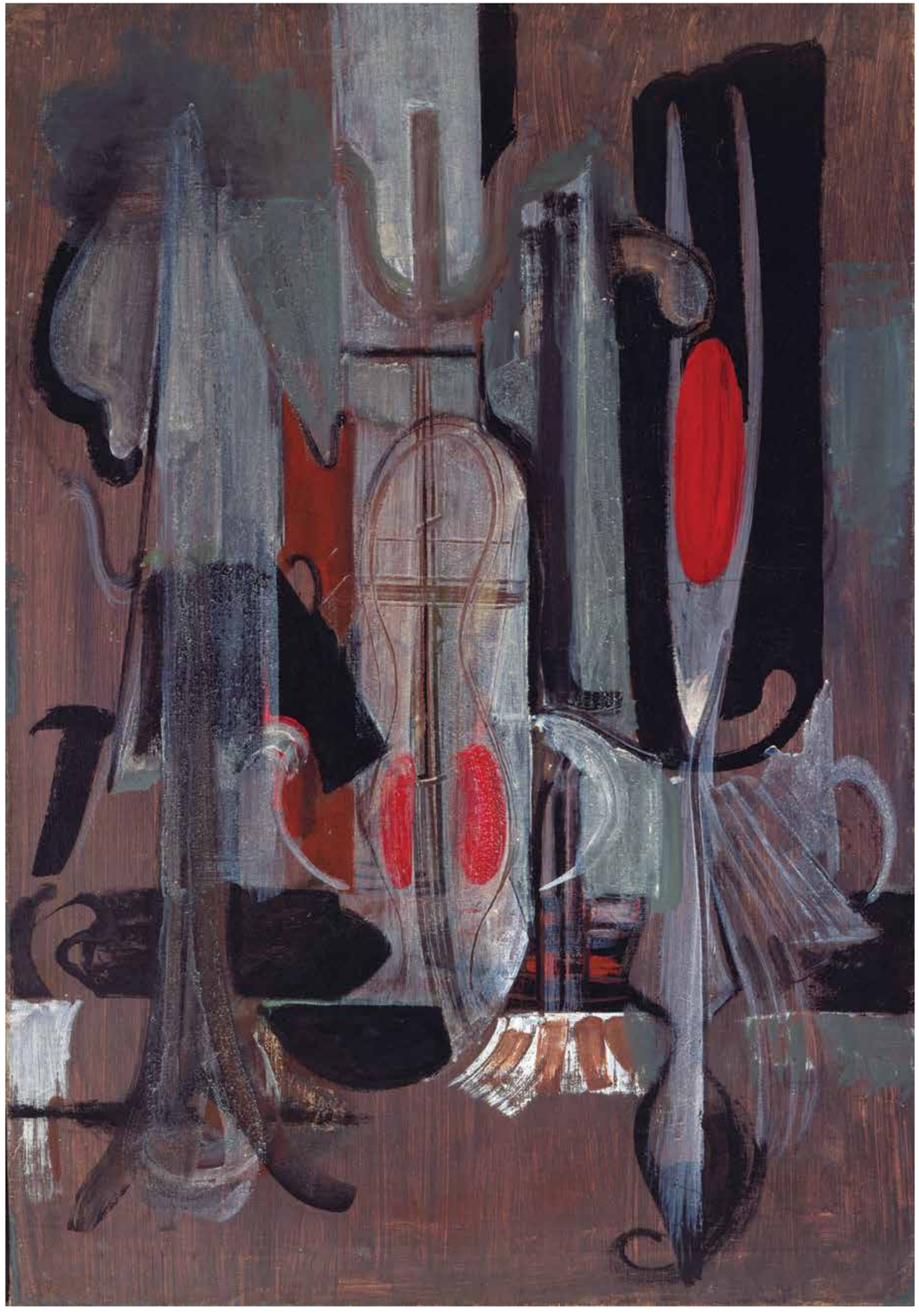
Adolph Gottlieb, *Untitled (Self Portrait in Mirror)*, c. 1938. Oil on canvas. 39⅞" × 29⅝" © 2025 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation

EDITOR'S NOTE:
FROM REALISM TO ABSTRACTION

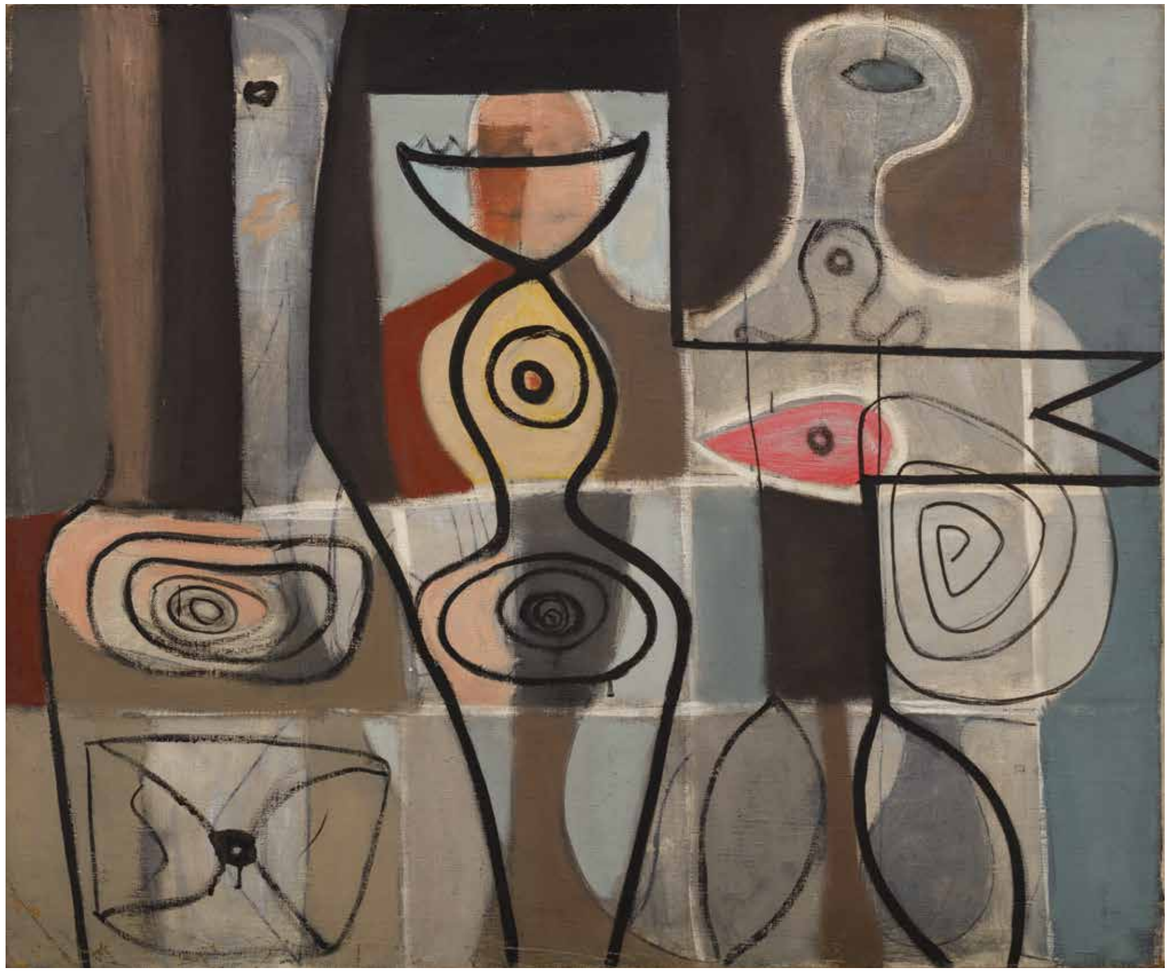
The realist works of Rothko and Gottlieb crystallize the essence of America in the 1930s, absorbing the aesthetic lessons of the Ashcan school and reflecting the emergence of a new Social realism and the struggle to find a visual language that could come to terms with the realities of the Great Depression. By the mid-1940s, fueled by a shared conviction that traditional realism was no longer adequate to convey the complexity and deep pathos of human experience, both artists had undergone a profound shift. Influenced by the Surrealist movement in Europe, Rothko began exploring mythological themes and ambiguous, organic forms, gradually moving away from recognizable subject matter toward a purely emotional and symbolic repertoire. It was at this time that Gottlieb embarked on a parallel path, developing his iconic Pictographs—grids of abstract, symbolic imagery inspired by primitive art, dreams, and the unconscious. Just as in the previous decade, the two artists' stylistic evolutions during the 1940s occurred in tandem, and their dialogue remained close. As Gottlieb wrote in 1943, "We favor the simple expression of the complex thought… we are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal."

This belief in the necessity of forging a reduced visual expression for the most profound complexity of thought itself—"the impact of the unequivocal," as Gottlieb puts it—can be understood in direct relation to the radical upheavals of World War II. Like many artists of their generation, both Rothko and Gottlieb felt a new urgency for art's role. No longer was it sufficient to simply depict visible reality. Art's new task was to go beyond the visible, to tap into a deeper search for universal meaning located in form itself. Ultimately, the distinct, individual languages of abstraction that these two artists invented in the ensuing years would offer a new way of confronting both the unspeakable and the unrepresentable. Operating in a new artistic paradigm defined by Theodor Adorno's famous dictum that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," Rothko and Gottlieb's abstraction offered a new way forward. Yet even as they went on to redefine the possibilities of what painting could be, each artist's approach remained rooted in the history of their shared development during the 1930s.

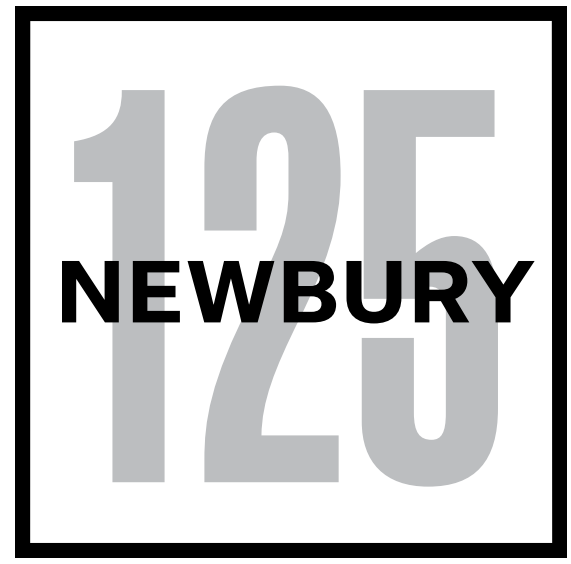
—O.S.



Mark Rothko, *Omens of Gods and Birds/Gods and Birds*, 1944/1945. Oil on canvas. 39¼ × 27¾"



Adolph Gottlieb, *Composition*, 1945. Oil, gouache, casein and tempera on linen. 29¹³⁄₁₆" × 35⅞"



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