

Artist Resources – Willem de Kooning (Dutch-American, 1904-1997)



de Kooning, 1950
Photograph: Rudy Burckhardt

[The Willem de Kooning Foundation](#)

[de Kooning at Mnuchin Gallery, New York](#)

Between 1949 and 1951, de Kooning elucidated his aesthetic theories in three lectures, given by fellow artist Robert Motherwell and curator Andrew Carnduff Ritchie. Read the text of [“A Desperate View,”](#) and [“The Renaissance in Order,”](#) from 1949, and [“What Abstract Art Means to Me”](#) from 1951.

“I feel I am getting more myself in the sense of I have all my forces. I hope so, anyhow. I have this sort of feeling that I am all there now and, you know, it’s not even thinking in terms of one’s limitations, because they have to come naturally. I think whatever you have, you can do wonders with it, if you accept them,” de Kooning tells art critic David Sylvester in a [charismatic interview from 1960](#) on the artist’s early years in New York and his relationship to figuration. “I have a bigger feeling now of freedom. I am more convinced, you know, of picking up the paint and the brush and drumming it out.”

[Watch de Kooning at work](#) and [discussing his return to painting figures](#) in these two brief video clips.

de Kooning’s process and relationship to drawing was the focus of two exhibitions in 2001. [Mitchell-Innes & Nash](#) in New York brought together previously unexhibited large-scale drawings to explore the artist’s method of tracing his paintings onto vellum to retain a catalogue of his stylistic development. [The Corcoran Gallery of Art in D.C.](#) hosted the traveling exhibition, *In Process*, focusing on the laborious tracings and reworkings at the center of his practice.

de Kooning’s final twelve paintings, executed in 1987, were brought together and exhibited publicly for the first time in 2001 by the [Matthew Marks Gallery in New York](#). The bright colors and bold, expressive brushwork represent a final, cumulative creative burst of an illustrious career.

In 2011, MoMA brought together 200 paintings, sculptures, prints, and drawings for [the first comprehensive retrospective of de Kooning’s](#) monumental career, tracing his development from his days as a student in the Netherlands in the 1920s through his Abstract Expressionist hey-day and his final paintings in the late 1980s. View the interactive [digital archive of the exhibition](#).

The [Princeton University Art Museum](#) worked with the de Kooning Foundation on a 2017 exhibition focusing on the symbiotic relationship between drawing and painting in the artist’s oeuvre through work produced in the 1960s and ’70s.

[Skarstedt Gallery, London](#) debuted the first de Kooning show in the UK in over twenty years in 2017, focusing exclusively on his late paintings in the 1980s, which are characterized by a fluid luminosity and gentle translucency at odds with the dense, textured abstractions earlier in his career.

In 2021, the [Musée de l’Orangerie](#) in Paris will present *Soutine/de Kooning*, which will present de Kooning’s work in dialogue with the Russian painter Chaïm Soutine, whom de Kooning discovered in New York in the 1930s and returned to as an influence for the next twenty years.



de Kooning in New York studio, 1968
Photograph: Dan Budnik

Willem de Kooning (Dutch-American, 1904-97)

Untitled, 1977

Oil and charcoal on paper mounted on panel

Private Collection; L2023:53.1

Born and raised in the Netherlands, Willem de Kooning came to the United States as a stowaway on a British ship bound for Argentina in 1926. He began working as a house painter and commercial artist in New York before becoming active in the modernist art scene. Along with Franz Kline (1910-1962), Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), his wife, Elaine de Kooning (1918-1989), Mark Rothko (1903-1970), and others, the artist was an influential figure in the development of Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s and 1950s. De Kooning turned away from painting in the 1960s, focusing his attention on sculpture, printmaking and drawing. However, in 1975, the artist returned to abstract painting at the age of 71. **Untitled** was part of this return, its free-flowing brushstrokes and soft, bright color characteristic of his late career.

On view August 18 – November 19, 2023





Willem de Kooning (Dutch-American, 1904-97)

Untitled, 1982

Oil on canvas

Private Collection; L2023:19.1

Born and raised in Rotterdam, Willem de Kooning came to the United States as a stowaway on a British ship in 1926. In the 1940s, he emerged as a central figure in the loose group of New York artists who became known as the Abstract Expressionists, including Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), Mark Rothko (1903-1970), Franz Kline (1910-1962), Lee Krasner (1908-1984), and his wife, Elaine de Kooning (1918-1989), among others. **Untitled** is from de Kooning's late career, when the painter was nearly eighty years old. In this period, de Kooning's work was reenergized after he became sober and repaired his estranged relationship with Elaine. The paintings he created beginning in the early 1980s display vibrant colors and fluid linework interspersed with large areas of white, a color de Kooning rarely used earlier in his career. The artist continued to work into the 1990s, when he began succumbing to the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease.

On view February 22 – May 28, 2023

Willem de Kooning (Dutch-American, 1904-97)

Untitled #14, 1977

Oil on paper mounted to canvas

Private Collection; L2020:119.2

1977 is considered one of the most creatively energetic years in Willem de Kooning's paradigmatic and influential career. Though de Kooning was a pivotal member of the Abstract Expressionist movement, he resisted the steadfast abstraction promoted by his contemporaries and continued exploring the figure and landscape through the 1950s and '60s. The untitled works from 1977, of which this piece is a stunning example, were created in quick succession after a decade of work that displayed a measured return to abstraction. De Kooning approached each piece with a renewed vitality and fervent curiosity for his chosen medium, working the paint with brush, palette knife, and fingers while rotating the paper support continuously. As he reflected: "I made those paintings one after the other, no trouble at all. I couldn't miss.... It's like a man at a gambling table [who] feels that he can't lose. But when he walks away with all the dough, he knows he can't do that again. Because then it gets self-conscious. I wasn't self-conscious. I just did it."

On view December 9, 2020 – March 14, 2021





Willem de Kooning (Dutch-American, 1904-97)

Untitled, 1975

Oil on canvas, strip framing

Private Collection; L2020:93.1

One of the twentieth century's most influential artists, Willem de Kooning began his artistic training in night school courses at the age of twelve in Rotterdam before stowing away on a ship to New York in 1927. Following a job painting murals for the Works Project Administration during the depression, de Kooning helped establish New York as the successor to Paris for post-war avant-garde painting. While his instinctual and energetic approach made him a central figure of the Abstract Expressionist movement, alongside contemporaries Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, de Kooning resisted its emphasis on the permanent dissolving of pictorial space and figuration. The tactile density of brushwork and paint in **Untitled** returns to the artist's abstract roots and the desire to convey emotion through a gestural, spontaneous application of paint. With a flurry of activity that threatens the boundaries of the canvas edge, the painting demonstrates de Kooning's continued oscillation between the poles of representation and abstraction in his lifelong desire to explore the material possibilities of paint and record his honest sense of the world.

On view August 19 – November 22, 2020