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de Kooning, Willem (1904–1997) Word Count: 581

A leading post-WWII artist, Willem de Kooning painted in the vigorous style known as Gestural Abstraction (Action Painting), one of the two divisions of Abstract Expressionism. The artists associated with this division—Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and Robert Motherwell, among others—emphasised the act of painting and used pronounced, often energetic, brushstrokes to convey expression. A preeminent figure of Abstract Expressionism, de Kooning occupied a distinct place within a group that rejected any critical labels. In 1955, de Kooning declared “Words and labels are very confusing. We need definitions. I'm not an Abstract Expressionist, but I express myself”. Although he experimented with various degrees of abstraction and epitomized the bold, improvisational brushstroke of Action Painting, de Kooning created a style that remained unique within the movement with its deep commitment to the body and the human figure. Blending Expressionist, Cubist, and Surrealist elements with technical skill, his paintings explored the ambiguous relations between figure and ground, abstraction and representation, and abstract versus overt figuration.

Born in the Netherlands in 1904, de Kooning apprenticed at a local commercial art and design firm at the age of twelve. For the next eight years, he attended classes at the Rotterdam Academy of Fine Arts, receiving an education in the principles of classical art. In 1926, de Kooning immigrated to the United States, settling in New York city, where he met artists such as John Graham, Stuart Davis, and his “most critical role model,” Arshile Gorky. After various commercial jobs, in 1935 he joined the WPA Federal Art Project which enabled him to focus on painting. His early work oscillated between figuration and abstraction, a dual commitment that characterized his career as a whole. His first solo exhibition—a group of black-and-white paintings shown at the Charles Egan Gallery in New York in 1948—prompted de Kooning’s first critical recognition as a leading artist. A number of acclaimed shows followed, but it was not until the exhibition of his controversial paintings of women at the Sidney Janis Gallery in 1953 that he achieved an international reputation. Combining archetypal and pop-culture references with aggressive brushstrokes and densely layered paint, the *Women* scandalized the public with their voluptuous “vulgarity” and fueled the ongoing debates between proponents of abstraction and figuration. The foremost advocate of abstraction, Clement Greenberg, openly criticized de Kooning’s return to the human figure, while Greenberg’s opponent, Harold Rosenberg, embraced the artist’s energetic brushstroke as the ultimate example of “action painting.” After the mid-1950s, in addition to figural paintings, de Kooning created landscapes, clay sculptures, cast bronze sculptures, and more abstract works. In the 1980s, he began a series of sparse, almost graphic compositions which spurred new critical debates. He died in 1997 in Long Island, New York.

**References and further reading**

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Willem de Kooning, *Woman, I*, 1950-52. Oil on canvas. 6' 3 7/8" x 58" (192.7 x 147.3 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. <http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=79810>