Gregory Gilbert

**Motherwell, Robert (1915-1991) Word Count**: 988

Robert Motherwell was one of the central founding members of the Abstract Expressionist movement in the United States during the 1940s and 1950s and served as its major theoretical spokesman throughout his career. The youngest figure in the New York School (a synonymous term he coined for Abstract Expressionism), Motherwell was one of the few who received a formal university education, which is reflected in his extensive series of published critical writings and his prolific activities as a book editor, lecturer and art teacher. Trained in philosophy and art history, Motherwell’s diverse intellectual interests also included modernist literature, psychoanalytic theory and radical politics, which deeply informed the symbolic content of his art. Motherwell is notable for aligning the artistic traditions of School of Paris modernism with the progressive formal and thematic concerns associated with the post-war American avant-garde. In contrast to other Abstract Expressionists like Jackson Pollock or Mark Rothko, who forged signature painting styles, Motherwell actively experimented with a variety of abstract modes and media, but is most renowned for his innovative production of collages and celebrated series of paintings the “Elegies to the Spanish Republic”.

Reared in California, Motherwell graduated from Standford University in 1937 with an A.B. degree in philosophy. Although Motherwell studied a broad range of philosophical movements, he was most committed to Pragmatism, especially the writings of John Dewey, whose *Art as* *Experience* (1934) exerted a profound influence on Motherwell’s aesthetic thought. Motherwell’s tendency to integrate geometric and gestural forms of abstraction in many of his works can be traced to Dewey’s insistence that objective processes of thought and emotive feeling are unified within lived experience. While at Stanford, he also studied such writers as James Joyce, Stéphane Mallarmé and Wallace Stevens, developing a lifelong devotion to modernist literature and poetry. In 1937, Motherwell entered the graduate program in philosophy at Harvard University. However, in 1940, he decided to pursue graduate studies in art history and moved to New York City, where he trained at Columbia University with Meyer Schapiro. Due to his background in aesthetics and art history, Motherwell began to publish critical essays on art in the 1940s in journals like *Partisan Review* and *Possibilities* (which he co-edited with the art critic Harold Rosenberg), continuing to produce authoritative theoretical writings on art throughout his career. During the 1940s, he also began serving as an editor for the prominent ‘Documents of Modern Art’ series, which published writings by such major modernists as Mondrian and Kandinsky and included *The Dada Painters and* *Poets* (1951), a landmark anthology that influenced a number of contemporary artistic trends. A significant aspect of Motherwell’s artistic legacy is his career as an essayist and scholarly editor of art historical anthologies, in which he helped to more broadly disseminate knowledge of modernist aesthetic and philosophical theory within American post-war culture.

Although in the 1930s Motherwell had studied visual art during his teenage and young adult years at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco and later at the Académie Julien in Paris, he did not pursue a serious art career until the 1940s in New York. Encouraged by Meyer Schapiro in 1940 to study with the Swiss Surrealist Kurt Seligmann, Motherwell embarked on an intensive phase of art making, experimenting with a variety of modernist vocabularies derived from Cubism, Fauvism, Neo-Plasticism and Surrealism. During the early 1940s, Motherwell became closely associated with the circle of exiled European modernists in New York City, in particular Surrealist émigrés like Andre Breton and the young Chilean artist Roberto Matta Echaurren. Through informal workshops held by Matta, Motherwell, Pollock, William Baziotes and other early Abstract Expressionists were introduced to the radical Surrealist technique of psychic automatism. Inspired by Surrealist psychological principles of unconscious, spontaneous creation, the automatic painting developed by the Abstract Expressionists was applied in a more formally controlled aesthetic manner. Motherwell dubbed this method “plastic automatism,” which served as the basis of the “Action Painting” style in the New York School. One of Motherwell’s most notable contributions to the Abstract Expressionist movement was his application of automatism to the practice of collage, an interest that was also inspired by the literary collage techniques of James Joyce and Marianne Moore. With such collage works as *Joy of Living* (1943) and *Mallarme’s Swan* (1944), Motherwell developed an innovative form of large-scale abstract collage based on a radical technique of expressively torn and pasted materials, which featured a variety of themes ranging from the mass media imagery of World War II to Symbolist poetics.

By the early 1950s, Motherwell had established himself as a leading figure in the Abstract Expressionist movement, whose works were supported by prominent gallery dealers and art critics like Peggy Guggenheim and Clement Greenberg. In the late 1940s and continuing into the 1950s, Motherwell began producing his most important series of paintings, the “Elegies to the Spanish Republic.” As represented in *Elegy to the Spanish Republic*, *no. 126* (1965-1975), these works feature an expressively painted design of boldly juxtaposed organic and architectonic shapes. Executed in a sombre monochromatic palette of black, white and ochre, the Elegies were inspired by the Spanish Civil War and have been interpreted as a lament for the destruction by Franco’s regime of the modern democratic values associated with the Second Spanish Republic. Dedicated to artistic experimentation, Motherwell produced a diverse body of works from the 1950s through the 1970s, which includes the *Je t’aime* series, the *Lyric Suite* and most importantly the “Open” series, which represent Motherwell’s variation on the contemporary trend of post-painterly abstraction.

**References and further reading**

Ashton, D. (ed.) (2007) *The Writings of Robert Motherwell*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Flam, J., et al. (2012) *Robert Motherwell Paintings and Collages: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 1941-1991, New Haven: Yale University Press

Gilbert, G. (2004) ‘Robert Motherwell’s World War Two Collages: Signifying War as Topical Spectacle in Abstract Expressionist Art’, *Oxford Art Journal*, 27 (3): 311-337.

**Image**



*Elegy to the Spanish Republic, no. 126*, 1965-1975

77 ¾ x 200 ¼ in (197.5 x 508.6 cm)

Purchased with the aid of funds from the National Endowment of the Arts with matching funds and partial gift of Robert Motherwell, 1973.289, University of Iowa Museum of Art.

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