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"The American Painter as a Blue Chip"
by Marvin Elkoff
TWO TITANS of the new industry: Jonas Rosenquist in an improvised canoe; Andy Warhol in his silver-foiled bathroom and dark glasses.
THE AMERICAN PAINTER AS A BLUE CHIP

by Marvin Elkonf

To the untutored eye the working conditions — and the work — may seem to be facets of the old Bohemia: but, my God, how the money rolls in!

The Longview Foundation some years ago set up a grant for painters who had made significant contributions and were in need of cash. A gentleman on the committee selecting the recipients reports that the Foundation used up most of its money at the same time as it ran out of eligible painters.

To many of us, the idea that there are no longer any painters both reputable and short of funds comes as a shock. It is hard to adjust to the rapidity of change in the United States. We are bred for one life and led another. And so we are prepared to look at the world of avant-garde art with memories of Modigliani selling his drawings in cafés and dying of consumption at thirty-five, of Soutine starving in his vermin-and-stench-ridden garret, of Van Gogh’s madness, of irascible Cézanne’s private labors and lack of public recognition.

The idea of a genius going unrecognized and unrewarded in his lifetime has always been part myth, but the myth has been more of a reality here in America than it ever was in Europe. Yet even the vivid example of Soutine is softened by the realization that Dr. Albert Barnes started buying him in quantity when the painter was thirty.

Today the myth serves a purpose. It is a selling weapon for the dealer; a justification for the uncertain collector. It is, in any event, one of the results of our history-conscious period: Be the first on your block to recognize a genius, says the dealer. Don’t let the critics make fun of you in thirty years, says the collector to himself.

Nevertheless, we have been trained to see the art world through these mythic glasses, and what we find today is something different, radically different.

Up until the end of World War II, great modern art was always assumed to be School of Paris. American artists themselves were Francophiles, and the collectors more so. Adolph Gottlieb, one of the four or five leaders of the Abstract Expressionist generation that has dominated American art until recently, remembers that up until the end of
the war he assumed that this situation would go on forever. And suddenly it began to dawn on people, first on the painters, that Americans were doing the best and most original art in the world. Soon the French were the ones doing the imitation. The process has already begun with Pop art, which now has imitators in almost every country.

Though painting power, along with so much other power, came to America in the Forties, there was still no money. But a painter like Willem de Kooning, America's most famous and most highly rewarded avant-garde painter, looks back regretfully to that period. He appreciates his great current success and his money, but he felt more reality then, more security, more exuberance. "First there was this underground reputation we had in the late Thirties and during the war, you know, one painter for another, by ourselves, to hell with the rest," he says, with a Dutch accent that you almost forget because of his hip, loose style. "Whatever figured on a big success? That sounded crazy. Then after the war the reputation was aboveground, you know, the critics, a few dealers like Egan. Still no money. But excitement."

Today, at sixty, de Kooning's paintings sell for anywhere from $3,000 to $35,000, according to size. He is involved in the seemingly endless task of building a studio-house in East Hampton (costing over $100,000).

De Kooning speaks of the huge house as if it were a piece of reality he could mine from a fantasy of wealth and success that never seems too firm or credible, even to an artist of his stature. He is nervous about his reputation, which is under attack, nervous about his next show. He works slowly, and few people have seen his recent work. He seems intent on conveying that he really does not make all that much money, after taxes. On the other hand, he insists that he does not want to seem ungrateful to the American government by complaining about the taxes.

These proper statements seemed odd coming from a man who feels himself in the romantic tradition of Van Gogh, but only if you read them without hearing the odd combination of irony and innocence that hovers under the words.

The big money did not come into art until the middle Fifties, as late as '58 and '59 for most of them. "Poor Jackson [Pollock, who died in an accident in 1956] started it all and he died before the money came," says de Kooning. Only eight or nine years ago, though his world fame was second only to Pollock's, de Kooning still had little money. Sidney Janis, whose gallery handled his work, had turned down a group of his paintings about women. Around Christmas-time, when de Kooning needed money to pay his mother's hospital bills, he offered these for sale from his studio. (He was then sharing a house in Bridgehampton, Long Island, with Ludwig Sander and the late Franz Kline.) Martha Jackson bought a number, which accounted for a fine show she had the next year. It was as late as 1959 that Janis held the historic de Kooning show, when all his paintings were sold the first day for a total of $150,000. De Kooning says it...
was so unnerving he wished he were back on the W.P.A. project.

De Kooning displays a childlike surprise, almost entirely sincere, at his fame, especially when it comes in the form of governmental recognition. ("Me! Who expected it. I came here as a stowaway, a kid of twenty.") One night the government traced him to a dinner at the sculptor Ibram Lassaw's in East Hampton. A man named Goodman left a message that President Johnson wanted to give de Kooning the Presidential Medal of Freedom and would he please call back. His first impulse was to figure out who was playing the practical joke. He was finally persuaded to make the call, and then had to be persuaded to go to Washington. It would have seemed like reverse snobbery, he said, not to go when such famous people as Leonard Bernstein would be there. As so often with celebrities, he was most impressed with the other celebrities.

Gottlieb's success came about the same time as de Kooning's—Gottlieb at sixty-one is a year older—but his life is very different. De Kooning would prefer to be left alone out in East Hampton; he lives there all year, and goes along with the business side of art only so far as he is pulled into it or persuaded it is necessary. A sturdy, direct and businesslike man, Gottlieb is always Gottlieb and one feels he does simply what he has to do to maintain his success. It was only eight years ago that he moved from Brooklyn to Manhattan, only four years ago that he bought a handsome $75,000 summer house on "Millionaire's Row" in East Hampton, formerly owned by Jacqueline Kennedy's aunts. In the late Thirties he spent his summers in Gloucester, Massachusetts, for $25 a month. In the early Fifties in Provincetown he still spent no more than $300 for the summer. Now, once each summer in East Hampton, Gottlieb throws a huge and stylish cocktail party for perhaps two hundred people—artists, gallery owners, collectors, and the local rich who are often the collectors. This year there were several maids, several bartenders, and a local policeman to keep traffic moving. Everyone but the painters seemed to enjoy the party. To them it was clearly a business occasion; the strain on their faces showed it.

The rise of these older painters—Kline, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and others, in addition to Pollock, de Kooning and Gottlieb, who though various in style are known as the first generation of Abstract Expressionists—was very slow and modest until the late Fifties. Most of them either had wives with jobs or worked themselves. The wives of both Newman and Gottlieb, for example, were teachers.

In 1940-1947 Gottlieb sold all his paintings to the Koots Gallery for $3,000. In 1960 a single painting sold for twice that. Today, especially after winning the recent Grand Prize at the Sao Paulo Bienal, a large Gottlieb will go for $10,000 to $15,000.

In 1967, after leaving a teaching job at Brooklyn College, Mark Rothko had difficulty raising enough money to make a trip to New Orleans—a matter of $900 or $700. When he came back he found he had made sales worth $10,000. Today, because of taxes, he re-
fuses to sell more than four or five paintings a year, and there is a long, long waiting list. Each of his paintings, since he paints large, sells for $15,000 to $25,000. Last year he rejected a sale to the Four Seasons because he did not like the idea of his paintings being hung in a restaurant. "I did them a favor," he says. "My paintings might have been bad for the digestion of their patrons."

In 1955, Newman was selling nothing at all. And now, according to collectors, it is an ordeal to get one at $15,000. Newman has been known to inquire where the collector will hang it, what paintings it will be near, and how sincere he really is in his desire for the painting. In other words, does the collector love him for his investment possibilities or does he really love his work.

In 1957, Janis Gallery had a hard time selling large Franz Kline paintings for $1,200; today they go for $25,000.

A Pollock bought for $8,000 in 1954 is now worth more than $100,000. Whereas prices had been rising steadily, it was his death in 1956 that triggered the beginning of the rise to a new plateau. Then, about three years later, prices of Pollocks jumped enormously and drew other artists up with them.

To one collector, these masters of the first generation have now become a "bunch of accountants. They're guarded, wary, suspicious."

Another collector sympathizes with them, sees them as Depression-bred, and as suspicious and quick because of the country's rejection of their work until they were on to fifty.

Both the first and second generations of Abstract Expressionism have been characterized as rougher, more drunken, brawling, and womanizing, angrier and less given to the amenities than the generation that followed. Henry Geldzahler, Associate Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture at the Metropolitan Museum, who is very friendly and involved with the younger painters, threw a large party last year where some of the older artists met the young generation of Pop and hard-edge people (to deal in at least two categories). To Robert Motherwell, younger than the first generation but considered part of it, there was a whole difference in style of life as well as style of painting. The younger painters were, he says, so much more polite and sweet, so much less angry and brawny.

Certainly the biggest reason is that painters, far from being rejected by society, are in fact drawn into a too passionate, if not too pure, embrace. To be outside society had been a twisting and frustrating experience.

Jasper Johns, one of the first very successful pop artists, began as a window dresser in partnership with Larry Rivers. He became a professional jazz musician and still plays sometimes. He no longer.

Andy Warhol selecting models at the supermarket.

The Tom Wesselmanns and Dick Bellamy; Lucas Samaras - his studio is being offered for sale for $17,000.

Barnett Newman, first-generation abstract expressionist.

Mike Goldberg behind a Mike Goldberg.

A Key Thing and Some Key Dealers: De Kooning's house in East Hampton; Critic Sam Hunter and Leo Castelli on the beach; Dick Bellamy, Director of the Groen Gallery;
But it also protected the artist from distortions of success, from all the familiar vices that beset the other entertainment worlds. The painting world is closest of all to that of fashion and the theatre. Unlike the movies, or even publishing, where a product is thrown out into the world of millions who then either take it or reject it, paintings are thrown to a limited audience, a more homogeneously rich audience, almost in a face-to-face situation. It thereby takes less to make a trend, and to break it.

This audience is restless for the new, needs the new as a distinguishing accoutrement. It uses painting as a sign of rising social status in a world where minks, swimming pools, foreign travel and huge homes no longer carry enough distinction or have the same personal appeal—for most collectors do like painting: it is not just a flip of the coin between racehorses and painting. Since painting becomes a way of identifying oneself, there is a tendency to pick up some new trend in painting—to become among the first collectors to buy a certain kind of far-out work.

Investment in painting becomes uncertain in this atmosphere, especially among the second line of collectors. The sudden rise of Pop art almost paralyzed the art business for awhile. Art sales were seriously hurt in 1963 because no one knew what effect Pop’s success would have on art prices, or how long Pop would last. In Los Angeles, said one gallery owner who had returned from there in the Summer of 1963, sales were at a standstill and galleries were on the verge of closing.

The Pop revolution was a perfect example of the fact that the small, compact world of modern painting is moved more quickly and easily than other culture worlds. Observers say that Pop took off—as opposed to developing slowly, which it would have done anyway—because of the support of three collectors: Mr. & Mrs. Robert C. Scull, Mr. & Mrs. Burton G. Tremaine, Jr., and Mr. & Mrs. Albert A. List. What happens in situations like this, where changes are sudden, fades steadily changing, is that painters have their eyes cocked on their market as well as on their paintings. They suffer the anxiety of a Marc Bohan or an Yves St. Laurent preparing for a spring showing. That goes for everyone, but most intensely for the young, who are bred to making it, anticipate making it. A noted collector pointed out a double rub: That fathers still don’t want their sons to be stupid enough to be painters; and if they don’t make it in this success world, they appear doubly stupid. Young painters ask in effect: “What’s the secret . . . how do you make it . . . how do you become a successful painter?” Since they now believe it can be done, they want to know how to do it.

When a young painter says this, he usually does not have in mind calculatedly painting for a certain market—opportunism is more complex and interesting than that, more intertwined with self-delusion. He usually has in mind that his paintings are just as good or as bad as another’s; he feels all he lacks is the special selling mystique.

It is a too easy cynicism to consider a
change of style an opportunistic change, for there are two histories to art, an internal stylistic history, and an external one of markets and collectors. Styles dry up, just as markets do.

Many people feel that both histories are operating in the case of the second-generation Abstract Expressionists—such painters as Al Leslie, Michael Goldberg, Grace Hartigan and Joan Mitchell. In the middle Fifties, these painters (who are all around forty now) were successful, quickly successful by the standards of the times. But in the recent crush of new fads and styles in the art world, they have become a frightening object lesson to other painters. Pressed between the masters of the first generation and the new men of Pop and hard-edge, their fame and prices rose and fell with alarming speed. They have been squeezed out by the New.

Whether they can come back is a familiar topic in the art world. Michael Goldberg is a good example that change can be successfully managed. Goldberg’s first success started in 1956 when Walter Chrysler came down to his cold-water loft on East Tenth Street and bought sixteen paintings for a total of $10,000, which he was to pay in four $2,500 installments. Until then, Goldberg had worked as a moving man. His painting brought him a materials stipend of $650 a year from the Poindexter Gallery.

Shortly thereafter, Martha Jackson gave him a $10,000-a-year contract and he was on his way—for awhile, until the younger generation pressed up under him. Last year he had gathered together a quantity of new paintings in a very different Pop-influenced style. Goldberg candidly states that Martha Jackson did not want to show him; she had no confidence that his paintings would sell. They seemed too radical a change and there is a half-articulated, rather silly notion in the art world that a change has to be slow and visible, one stage related to another, thus betokening integrity. But she was persuaded to do so and the show sold out.

Not all changes work with such financial felicity. Al Leslie tried and so far has not succeeded. After an unsuccessful showing of Pop paintings in Los Angeles last year, he is now reported working in a realistic tradition. And there is the case of an older painter, Michael Loew, a serious and reputable artist who, during all the years of Abstract Expressionism’s reign, painted in the then unfashionably pure geometrical style. Friends kept suggesting that he loosen up, get more surface brushwork. He refused for years, then gradually changed. Now that he paints in the looser, more painterly style of Abstract Expressionism, he is once again on the outs with fashion.

Galleries, too, get squeezed by the new when they commit themselves to the “wrong” school at the wrong time. The handsome, well-financed Howard Wise Gallery on Fifty-seventh Street supported the cause of the first and second generation Abstract Expressionism for several years, to ever-diminishing returns. It is relieving itself of some of these painters, taking on the now popular geometrical and optical painters.

So far as the (Continued on page 112)
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middle generation of Abstract Expressionism is concerned, Mark Rothko sees the problem as a possible release from a "false" art history." He feels that in his generation, "there is no art history; there is no time." The glare of success, the pull of money and fame is there, a reality, and he feels that if his work is going to be an art for himself, he'd better think about it. "One can conceive of the lights going out," he says; "but if they did their work consciously, it was not only a question of art for art's sake, but one for themselves."

NBC that this world in fashion it is probably safer not to be part of it. He says there is no time. His work is not for a market, he says. It is for his own generation. "It's the kind of generation," he says, "where the things of a generation mean more than the things of all the rest." If a painting is too "cool," it will not sell. His point is that in this world in fashion it is probably easier not to be part of it. He says there is no time. His work is not for a market, he says."It's the kind of generation," he says, "where the things of a generation mean more than the things of all the rest." If a painting is too "cool," it will not sell.

Rivers' rapidity of success, the year in which he was named man of the year by the New York Times and soon became the most important painter of the new world of Pop.

One of the most recent and stunning successes has been thirty-year-old James Rosenquist, who rose from obscurity to fame in twenty years, whose paintings rose from $600 to $4,000 in the same space of time, little more than a month ago, he was discovered less than three years ago by Richard Bellamy of the Stable gallery, who arranged for him to exhibit. (For the record, he was first discovered by a bookseller who read an essay about Rosenquist in Esquire."

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