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Clyfford Still in the 1930s: The Formative Years of a Leading Abstract Expressionist

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Visual Arts

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CLYFFORD STILL IN THE 1930S:
THE FORMATIVE YEARS OF A
LEADING ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by
Emma Richan

Graduate Program in Visual Arts, Art History

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies The University of
Western Ontario London, Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

In 2011, Clyfford Still's painting *1949-A-No.1* sold for \$61.7 million at Sotheby's auction house. This painting was one of four up for auction by the artist that night, fetching a total of \$114 million to build the Clyfford Still Museum in Denver to house his entire estate. Still was among the most celebrated and notorious of the Abstract Expressionists, receiving the highest praise from Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and Clement Greenberg during his lifetime. Still's legacy has faltered since his death in 1980. Until 2011, 95% of his life's work was stored in a barn in Maryland, hidden from view. Limited availability and accessibility of Clyfford Still's artwork make him today's "greatest unknown painter."

This thesis begins to explore the previously hidden life and work of Clyfford Still in the 1930s, using the archival and visual material at the Clyfford Still Museum. I have approached the project chronologically to show how his work in the 1930s set the foundation for his success in as an Abstract Expressionist in the 1950s. Still was committed to creating a North American art form free from European influence and, as a result, traveled extensively within the United States and Canada. By largely eschewing the New York art scene, Still found inspiration in North West Coast Native American culture. His interest in man's relationship with the land was a theme that he derived from Native American culture and also related to the popular Regionalist art movement. Many themes from the 1930s evolved into symbolic motifs that he used for the rest of his career.

Keywords: Clyfford Still, Modern Art, Social Realism, Regionalism, Abstract Expressionism, Great Depression, American Art, Washington, Nespelem Art Colony, Yaddo Springs, Native American, James Clifford.

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INTRODUCTION

*My work in its entirety is like a symphony in which each painting has its part.*¹

Clyfford Still

Clyfford Still is celebrated as the first of the Abstract Expressionists to develop an abstract style. During his lifetime, Still's American contemporaries recognized his boldness in contrast to their continued preoccupation with the representational.² Regrettably, praise sung by notable peers Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, gallerist Peggy Guggenheim, and art critic Clement Greenberg, largely failed to outlive them. David Anfam and Stephen Polcari are among the few scholars invested in valuing Still's legacy. Part of the problem may be that there are limited opportunities to study Still's work, especially his creative output before 1943, due to lack of availability and accessibility.

It is only since 2011, nearly 30 years after the artist's death, that 95% of his artistic production became available for scholarly study and public display.³ Furthermore, a substantial amount of archival records and objects only surfaced in 2012.⁴ Due to the expansiveness of his estate, some of the artworks and archives are still being processed, and discoveries about Still's

¹ Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, *Gallery Notes, Volumes 21-25* (Berkeley: University of California, 1958, digitized 2007), 70.

² Robert Motherwell referred to Still as "the most original. A bolt out of the blue." "Concerning the Beginnings of the New York School: 1939-1943. An interview with Robert Motherwell conducted by Sidney Simon in New York in January 1967" *Art International* 11, no. 6 (Summer 1967), 23. Jackson Pollock stated "Still makes the rest of us look academic." Sam Hunter, *Masters of the Fifties* (New York: Marisa del Re Gallery, 1985).

³ Dean Sobel and David Anfam, "Why A Clyfford Still Museum?," in *Clyfford Still: The Artist's Museum* (New York: Skira Rizzoli Publications, 2012), 36.

⁴ Dean Sobel and David Anfam, "Still's Journey," in *Clyfford Still: The Artist's Museum* (New York: Skira Rizzoli Publications, 2012), 102.

life and work are ongoing. The estate includes over 825 paintings, 2,300 works on paper, and extensive archival material including letters, journal entries, photographs, and Still's personal library. Approximately 100 paintings and drawings date from 1920-1943 and comprise much of the understudied early work. The artist's will stipulated that his entire estate be preserved by a municipality willing to create a museum from it.⁵ After many offers from across the United States, Still's second wife, Patricia, accepted Denver, Colorado as the best place for the Clyfford Still Museum.⁶ Although possibly not the most desirable location for Still's oeuvre, the artist would not have cared much, as he believed that "those who traveled to art would take the work more seriously. He made this kind of effort as a young man, riding a train across the country to see the original art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art...these efforts shaped his appreciation of others' works."⁷ In other words, Still believed there was value in viewing art as part of a journey, or pilgrimage. The art collection and archives at the Clyfford Still Museum have been vital to my research, and are obviously seminal to understanding the artist's lifelong stylistic and conceptual evolution.

⁵ Sobel and Anfam, "Why A Clyfford Still Museum?," 17.

⁶ Twenty American cities attempted to obtain the Clyfford Still estate, and Denver made two attempts, only to secure the acquisition on the second attempt. Sobel, "Why A Clyfford Still Museum?," 39.

⁷ Sandra Still Campbell, "Foreword," in *Clyfford Still: The Artist's Museum*, ed. Dean Sobel and David Anfam (New York: Skira Rizzoli Publications, 2012), 8.

Alluding to the development and cohesion of his oeuvre, Clyfford Still said that, “It was a journey.”⁸ His well-documented aversion to revealing any meaning behind his work meant that when he did speak of it, he chose his words carefully. In welcoming the idea of a journey as a guide through his oeuvre, I argue in this thesis that his transient lifestyle from 1905 through the 1930s was an essential factor to his stylistic and conceptual development as an artist. The 1930s was a period of experimentation for Still and a catalyst for his work as an Abstract Expressionist in the 1940s and 50s. During the 1930s, he frequently moved between homes, school and work, specifically between various areas of Washington and Alberta. Still’s notorious dismissal of artistic influences and his isolation from the New York art scene forces one to take a less conventional path in analyzing his work and the possible artistic influences that shaped it. It is in this vein that I direct the bulk of my attention to Still’s nomadic lifestyle as a source of artistic novelty and philosophical inspiration during the 1930s. James Clifford discusses the “nomad” in both modern and post-modern contexts, as “far from an experience of escape or flight...a regulated practice of travel within a known world.”⁹ He speculates on “the current appeal of the nomad metaphor - an image of dwelling-in-travel, of inhabiting, with mastery, a ‘place’ that’s too large.” Still traveled extensively, with varying degrees of necessity, first as a child with his parents, and as a young adult on his own for education and work. The word “nomad” and the concept of “dwelling-in-travel” will be used in this paper to reflect on Still’s travels in both the

⁸ Clyfford Still in a letter to Gordon Smith on January 1, 1959, written for the catalogue of a collection of Still’s work held at the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, of which Smith was the director. The collection was exhibited from November 5 to December 13 1959. “Clyfford Still (1904-1980) Letter to Gordon Smith,” in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 592.

⁹ James Clifford and Vivek Dhareshwar, “Traveling Theories, Traveling Theorists,” *Cultural Studies* 5 (1989): 5, http://culturalstudies.ucsc.edu/PUBS/Inscriptions/vol_5/clifford.html.

known world of his youth, and on his travels in the unknown world of Nespelem. The ethnographical roots of James Clifford's definition of nomadism frames the discussion of Still's interaction with Native Americans quite aptly. This nomadic lifestyle fuelled his experimentation with different techniques, styles, and themes, resulting in the most productive yet misunderstood decade of his artistic career.

Even though Still did not like to be discussed in terms of the artists who influenced him, I recognize the significance of pairing a more traditional analysis of certain specific contemporary influences in addition to studying Still's work within Clifford's concepts of nomadism and dwelling-in-travel. I argue that Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and Wassily Kandinsky likely influenced his early stylistic, conceptual and creative processes.¹⁰ They inspired Still to capture the emotion and meaning hidden in an everyday scene.

Evans and Lange were part of the U.S. federal government sponsored Farm Security Administration (FSA) and the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), which brought together a group of painters and photographers whose role it was to cross the country capturing images of American life in a manner accessible to a general audience.¹¹ Still painted many scenes employing similar subject matter and compositional devices because Evans' and Lange's photographs of struggling rural families resonated with Still due to his own difficult childhood on a farm. Another artist-nomad, Kandinsky, moved from Russia to Western Europe and eventually traveled the U.S.. He drew from a myriad of historic, national and mythic memories

¹⁰ Michael Auping, "The Buffalo Project," in *Clyfford Still: 1904-1980: The Buffalo and San Francisco Collections*, ed. Thomas Kellein (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1992), 37.; Dean Sobel and David Anfam, "Still's Journey" in *Clyfford Still: The Artist's Museum* (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2012), 80.

¹¹ Linda Gordon, "Dorothea Lange: The Photographer as Agricultural Sociologist," *The Journal of American History* 93, no. 3 (2006), 698.

in his art and life, remaining mindful of his roots in all he undertook.¹² This approach proved quite attractive to Still as well.

Jackson Pollock, also from the American Midwest, began his career as a representational painter under the tutelage of the revered American painter and muralist Thomas Hart Benton. Even though Pollock and Still shared similar backgrounds and painting styles, Pollock's legacy is world renowned. This is largely because Pollock embraced the lime light of New York City, agreeing to work with magazines, film makers, newspapers, and other parties looking to exploit the explosive new artists known as the Abstract Expressionists.¹³ As a result, the span of Pollock's career was meteoric; burning intensely for a short period of time. By the time Still moved to New York in the late 1940s, Pollock was battling alcoholism and struggling to secure shows even with his own dealer, Peggy Guggenheim.¹⁴ Critical attention shifted from Pollock to Still, with notable art critic Clement Greenberg describing Still as "one of the most important and original painters of our time— perhaps the most original of all painters under fifty-five, if not the best."¹⁵ Although Pollock and Still were both raised in the Midwest, and started working as

¹² Carol McKay, "Modernist Primitivism?: The Case of Kandinsky," *Oxford Art Journal* 16, no.2 (1993), 21.

¹³ Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), 338.

¹⁴ Rothko, Mark. *Mark Rothko to Clyfford Still on behalf of Peggy Guggenheim, New York, Fall 1945*. Letter. From the Clyfford Still Museum archives.

¹⁵ Clement Greenberg, "American-Type Painting," *Partisan Review* (1955), 228.

Regionalists before transitioning to Abstraction, Still was grounded by a desire to paint for himself above all.¹⁶ This gave his career longevity and is a crucial aspect of Still's legacy.

For the purpose of clarity I have organized this thesis chronologically, specifically according to Still's homesteads from 1904 through the 1930s. Chapter One discusses the stylistic and thematic beginnings of Still's work in Killam and Bow Island, Alberta, and Still's subsequent visits home to his family's farms. Still's upbringing as the son of a farmer during the Great Depression likely made him acutely aware of job insecurity and the financial risk of becoming an artist. This harsh reality forced Still to consider the social role of the artist.¹⁷ Although near-constant travel could have been overwhelming, Still embraced dwelling-in-travel and experienced various North American lifestyles. He visited some places often enough that he could recognize subtle changes in the community. Still's finely tuned observational skills gave him a unique perspective that allowed him to think critically about the content and meaning of his artwork from a young age.

In Chapter Two, I compare Still's handling of Native American imagery and culture with that of Pollock and the Canadian west coast painter Emily Carr. Pollock is an obvious choice, while Carr is interesting in providing an illustrative parallel in terms of her involvement with Northwest Coast Native Americans to Still's founding and working at the Nespelem Art Colony. The latter was created with the goal of educating emerging and established artists on how to

¹⁶ I use the term abstraction to describe artwork that is free of representational qualities. Notably, there was a transitional phase for many artists who originated as Regionalists, but gradually adopted the use of non-representational components in their artwork before completing removing the representational to make room for a wholly abstract image.

¹⁷ Considering Still's upbringing and his life circumstances, it is unclear what drove Still to become an artist. Further investigation in this matter is required in order to avoid speculation.

draw and paint Native Americans living in Nespelem on the Colville Reservation of the Confederated Tribes of Colville. The motivation for the art colony was twofold: to practice drawing the human form, and to study the “Other.”¹⁸ By the mid-twentieth century, interest in anthropology and ethnography was growing in scholarly circles and popular culture.¹⁹ As Still’s field notes from this time suggest, artists were studying the “Indians” as much as they were studying art. The comparison between Still and Carr reveals fundamental differences between the two in terms of their interaction with the tribes they came in contact with, and how it echoed itself in their work. It provides a needed perspective on the different ways Western artists engaged with Native American culture and art at the time. Fundamentally different approaches to interacting with these tribes is reflected in the divergent artistic styles and specific subject matter rendered in their artwork.

Chapter Two also discusses Still’s increasingly “tragic” style and themes during his time in Pullman, Spokane and the Nespelem Art Colony in Washington.²⁰ His journal and field notes from this time were recently discovered within the estate housed at the Clyfford Still Museum. In Spokane, Still attended university and eventually taught as a professor at the Washington State University (WSU) in Pullman. With a fellow WSU professor, Still co-founded the Nespelem Art Colony. The time he spent at Nespelem was highly influential on his use of colour and motifs.

¹⁸ For more on the “Other” and “Orientalism,” see: Edward W. Said, “Orientalism,” *The Georgina Review* 31, no. 1 (1977), 162-206.

¹⁹ James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, no. 4 (1981), 540.

²⁰ Still says there was a turning point when his artwork became “tragic,” a word he also used to describe the Native American people living in the Colville Native Reserve in 1935-6. Dean Sobel and David Anfam, *Clyfford Still: The Artist’s Museum* (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2012), 62. Still, Clyfford, *Field notes from Nespelem Art Colony, June 1936*. Field notes. From The Clyfford Still Museum archives, 12.

This chapter focuses on Still's style and technique as they developed through the 1930s, including his use of light and colour, hand-made paints, and textured application. Here, I compare Emily Carr's approach to Native American peoples and culture as a subject matter, to Still's experience at the Nespelem Art Colony.

Still is commonly associated with the Abstract Expressionists because he shared many of their ideas and approaches.²¹ Abstract expressionism is an American art movement developed in the 1940s. It is best known for its role in shifting the art world centre from Paris to New York, and for its emphasis on exploring the unconscious through painting. Abstract Expressionism is often explained in terms of psychoanalysis, based on the work of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung.²² This is partly due to the influence of many Surrealist artists who expressly referenced these psychoanalysts after immigrating to New York preceding and during World War II.²³ However, in a letter, Still states "...there will be no explanation (of my work) logically, whatever the psychologists or psychoanalysts may pretend."²⁴ This not only shows that Still likely did not reference Freud or Jung directly or as a principal guiding force but also that he did not appreciate the imposition of psychoanalysis on his work. Additionally, his personal library reveals that he

²¹ I will use the terms Abstract Expressionist and New York School interchangeably throughout this essay, using the term Abstract Expressionists to designate specifically the core group of Jackson Pollock, Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman.

²² Extensive research has been done on the influence of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung on the New York School. For more on Clyfford Still's connection to psychoanalytic theory, see: Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 93-116.

²³ Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School*, 95-96.

²⁴ Still, Clyfford. *Clyfford Still's Journal notes, Richmond, Virginia, January 11, 1944*. Journal notes. From The Clyfford Still Museum archives.

did not own a single book on either Freud or Jung. While these points do not eliminate the possibility of a Freudian or Jungian influence on Still, their discovery encourage alternate explanations of his work.

Still spent the summers of 1934 and 1935 at the elite artist colony, Yaddo Saratoga Springs, in New York.²⁵ His time there was highly productive because he could devote himself to creating art without the distraction of teaching. What emerged was an experimentation with different media in an effort to convey meaning and emotion affectively. While I discuss Bow Island, Killam, Pullman, Spokane, Nespelem, and New York independently of one another, it is important to note that Still was actively travelling between them throughout the 1930s. Still also traveled to Virginia, California, Colorado, and Maryland during his lifetime, however, a discussion of the latter states exists outside the chronological scope of this project.

²⁵ Patricia Still, "Clyfford Still: Biography," in *Clyfford Still: 1904-1980: The Buffalo and San Francisco Collections*, ed. Thomas Kellein (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1992), 146.

CHAPTER ONE

Painting a Changing World: 1904-1933

*It has always been my hope to create a free place or area of life where an idea can transcend politics, ambition and commerce.*²⁶

Clyfford Still

1.1 EARLY YEARS, Grandin, Killam, and Bow Island

Still's father and mother were both born in Ontario, Canada, of Scottish and Irish descent, respectively.²⁷ Still was born in 1904 in Grandin, North Dakota and, a year later, moved to Spokane, Washington with his parents.²⁸ Much of Still's early work, most of which were landscapes, is discussed in relation to his time in North Dakota, despite the fact that he lived there for only the first year of his life.²⁹ Still's artistic references to the prairies are likely inspired instead by his experiences in Alberta. Still's father was a professional accountant in North Dakota and Washington, but he returned to Canada when the opportunity arose to acquire a plot of farmland in Alberta through government sponsorship.³⁰ Still was just six years old when he

²⁶ *Clyfford Still, Introduction*, edited by Ti-Grace Sharpless (Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1963), catalogue of an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, October 18-November 29, 1963.

²⁷ David Brown, "All-to-his-own Museum for America's Greatest Unknown Painter, Clyfford Still," in *The Washington Post*, April 6, 2012.

²⁸ Patricia Still, "Clyfford Still: Biography," in *Clyfford Still 1904-1980: The Buffalo and San Francisco Collections*, ed. Thomas Kellein (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1992), 146.

²⁹ David Anfam, "Of the Earth, the Damned, and of the Recreated: Aspects of Clyfford Still's Earlier Work," *The Burlington Magazine* 135, no. 1081 (1993): 260.

³⁰ Patricia Still, "Clyfford Still: Biography" in *Clyfford Still 1904-1980: The Buffalo and San Francisco Collections*, ed. Thomas Kellein (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1992), 146.

and his parents moved to a rural area just south of Bow Island in 1910.³¹ This move meant that Still's father had to step back from accounting to work principally as a farmer.³²

Growing up, Still collected books, prints, and magazines, and studied music, literature and poetry, all of his own volition.³³ Although Still's father was the head of a strict household, he nonetheless encouraged his son's aptitude for the piano, his affinity for drawing, and his overall interest in the arts.³⁴ As a budding artist, Still developed a "good eye" through the keen observation of his immediate surroundings. His constant migration, particularly between Washington and Alberta, kept him alert to his ever-new environment. By the age of seven, Still had already lived in two countries and two American states, fostering qualities of adaptability and flexibility in the young artist. These qualities became part of the foundation upon which Still built a successful career.

Clyfford Still's sketches, pastels and paintings from the 1930s reveal that he was fundamentally a colourist, despite his reputation for using an exclusively earth tone colour palette. In fact, Still rarely used black in his work from the 1920s and early 1930s, where his palette was dominated by bright colours. Occasional notes on his sketches explicitly advised against using black, suggesting dark purple as a substitute where necessary.³⁵ From the

³¹ Patricia Still, "Clyfford Still: Biography" in *Clyfford Still 1904-1980: The Buffalo and San Francisco Collections*, ed. Thomas Kellein (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1992), 146.

³² Still, "Clyfford Still: Biography," 146.

³³ Still, "Clyfford Still: Biography," 146.

³⁴ Thomas B. Hess, "The Outsider," *Art News* 68 (December 1969), 36.

³⁵ For example, Clyfford Still wrote this note in pencil on *PP-488* (Pastel on paper, 1931), The Clyfford Still Museum, Denver.

beginning, he ground his own pigments and added linseed oil as desired. In so doing, he could control the graininess, viscosity, or fluidity of his colours before they even touched his brush or palette knife. The physical texture of his paintings became increasingly important their meaning as he moved away from the representational. For example, the roughness of the paint often evokes the raw, harsh atmosphere of the dirty thirties. The roughness references the natural world during the Dust Bowl in the prairies. In controlling the amount of linseed oil he used for his pigments he could play with surface texture and sheen.

Most of Still's figures were outlined in black as a nod to his skill as a draughtsman. During the 1930s and, especially at Nespelem, he actively made colour sketches with notes directly on his work to indicate what colour to apply and how to apply it on the next version, as is the case with *PP-488* (1931). He also experimented with colour agreement as shown in *PP-838* (1930). Watercolour *PW-1* (1931) is a train scene, shown with a pillowy soft pink cloud in the background, bringing warmth to a winter scene with a train labourer signalling to another person down the tracks. The train is brilliantly painted in hues of orange, red and yellow.

By the late 1930s, Still started including black and other dark pigments to his palette. Soon after this addition, many of his paintings neglected background details. Black is often a colour associated with fear, or otherwise evocative of negative feelings; Still, however, embraced black for its potential to evoke warmth and comfort.³⁶ His compositions and subjects make the

³⁶ Clyfford Still said: "Black was never a colour of death or terror for me. I think of it as warm - and generative." Katharine Kuh, "Foreword," in *Clyfford Still* ed. John P. O'Neill (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979), 11.

viewer feel as if they are intruding on private suffering.³⁷ Although this suffering represented the experiences of so many in North America during the 1930s, Still had a way of moving the viewer to empathy and action. Like a car crash that you can not look away from, the sometimes ghoulish and manipulated human forms in Still's works are as disturbing and unappealing now as they were when they were painted.

In 1925 when Still was 21 years old, he ventured from Alberta to the east coast and got his first taste of a formal art education.³⁸ He was already skilled at drawing and painting by the time he set off for New York, but he longed to view the art of his studies in person.³⁹ However, Still was disappointed when he visited the museums. The art books he had read were more comprehensive, whereas the museums only displayed a select few artworks from each represented artist. This experience may have been where Still began to conceive of a legacy for himself that included a wider representation of his oeuvre. Apart from visiting the city's museums, he enrolled in the Art Students League.⁴⁰ After only forty-five minutes of studying at

³⁷ Many of Still's figures in his paintings from the 1930s are shown alone or in pairs, frontal facing in a confrontational yet vulnerable position. For example, *PH-275* and *PH-651*. However, even in paintings featuring a group of people, such as *PH-80* and *PH-81*, the viewer receives a penetrating glare from the figures, as if to signal that the viewer has abruptly interrupted a conversation. Still said: "painting must be an extension of the man, of his blood, a confrontation with himself. Only thus can a valid instrument of individual freedom can be created." David L. Shiney, *Art*, December 22, 1969, 105.

³⁸ Stephen Polcari, "Clyfford Still: Of Plentitude and Power," in *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 91.

³⁹ Polcari, "Clyfford Still: Of Plentitude and Power," 91.

⁴⁰ The Art Students League was a well-known arts school that many of the best-known artists in the United States, Europe and Canada attended or taught at. Adolph Gottlieb, Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg, were a few of Still's contemporaries who attended, and Thomas Hart Benton taught there. Still was taught by Vaclav Cytlacil, who later donated property and funding to start an international residency program. His contribution as a teacher and donor significantly ameliorated the facilities and breadth of the Art Students League's programming,

the Art Students League, he felt he had already surpassed the school's teachings.⁴¹ This is the story he recounted for most of his life. Its veracity, however, is debatable. Newspaper advertisements promoting Still's work proudly announce his education at the Student Arts League.⁴² This promotional gesture suggests Still's willing association with the Student Arts League for at least several years after he left. Another clue suggesting the story was exaggerated was his participation in an exhibition at the National Academy of Design in New York in 1935.⁴³ The National Academy of Design shared headquarters with the Students Art League and were closely affiliated at this time.⁴⁴ In 1935, Still was living in Pullman, Washington, but this exhibition indicated that "Birdsworth & Son" was his New York based art dealer.⁴⁵ This evidence suggests that Still had rooted himself in New York in 1925 for at least six months, not 45 minutes, giving himself time to develop preliminary relationships with members of the New York art scene.

He returned from New York to his father's farm, probably after a challenging and largely unsuccessful journey. However, the Great Depression, magnified by horrible droughts, swept away agricultural and employment opportunities across North America. Rural America was

⁴¹ Other accounts indicate he attended the Art Students' League for six months. His earliest exhibition advertisements point to the young artist legitimacy by highlighting his education at the Art Students League. *Art News* 46, May 1947, 50.

⁴² *Art News* 46, May 1947, 50.

⁴³ Art label for an artwork entitled "Moving" by Clyfford Still, 1935, shows the artwork was for the National Academy of Design exhibition in 1935. Denver: The Clyfford Still Museum archives. Accessed July 24, 2014.

⁴⁴ National Academy of Design, "History," in *National Academy of Design*, July 28, 2014, www.nationalacademy.org/about-us/history/.

⁴⁵ Art labels for an artwork entitled "Moving" by Clyfford Still, 1935. Denver: The Clyfford Still Museum archives. Accessed July 24, 2014.

particularly hard hit in the 1930s, exacerbated by the worst drought in recent history.⁴⁶ Still and his family suffered greatly in an area of Alberta hard hit during the Dust Bowl, leaving the land infertile. Still moved between his homestead in Alberta and his school in Washington from about 1928 until 1933. When he returned to Washington from Alberta, exhausted and disillusioned, the dean of fine art at Spokane University told him, “the wheat in Canada isn’t dependent on you.”⁴⁷ Overall, his teachers and peers were unsympathetic to his situation. Although unemployment rates were at a historic high, apparently not everyone experienced the Great Depression to the same extent.⁴⁸

Some of the wealthier Americans profited from the Depression by taking advantage of lower costs and snapping up bankrupt businesses at desperate prices. Generally speaking, cities such as New York and Toronto were desirable destinations for unemployed men from the west coast or prairie states and provinces because they were not as affected. This of course became a vicious cycle as more and more people flocked eastward for opportunities, those opportunities shrank. Living in Spokane, Washington in 1934 when *PH-651* (Fig.18) was painted, Still was one of the men who stood his ground and stayed in the west, despite feeling marginalized or unrecognized by the wealthier parts of the country. The realization that the West Coast was on its own resonated deeply at a time when trans-national communication and access to timely information was limited relative to today’s standards of immediacy.

⁴⁶ Michiel Horn, *The Dirty Thirties: Canadians in the Great Depression* (Toronto: Copp Clark Publishing, 1972), 96.

⁴⁷ Anfam, “Still’s Journey,” 67.

⁴⁸ Horn, *The Dirty Thirties: Canadians in the Great Depression*, 85.

Still demonstrated his interest in humanity and progress in *PH-651*. Despite the man's obvious lack of material wealth, the horses and the man stand tall and prepare to move forward. They are prey and predator, supporting one another in a symbiotic relationship. The horses stand side-by-side as they would if pulling a plough but the viewer's proximity to the horses suggests that they are waiting, not working. The "fight or flight" instinct of the horses would have been familiar to Still, so his decision to paint the horses with alert ears and pawing hooves suggests that their "fight" instinct has taken over. They are empowered by the man with the wide stance and strong body language in front of them. The horses in *PH-651* appear tired but restless, they shift their weight, stomp their hooves and keep their ears alert. The man is firmly planted in a standing position, with his feet far apart as if to brace himself. He looks directly ahead, which, for the viewer, is in the distance behind us to the left. His chin and face recoil somewhat behind his body, suggesting an outward strength and an inner fear. He bravely faces that which he cannot control, but is undeniably haunted by it. The man tends a sympathetic hand toward the muzzle of one of the horses, yet he has nothing to offer it. Instead, both of his hands appear stained red, possibly with blood.⁴⁹ Still's library, still largely intact at The Clyfford Still Museum archives, reveals that the artist owned several books of Shakespearean plays. Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, whose characters reference blood throughout the play, may have inspired Still to introduce blood's symbolism into his paintings. Macbeth says, "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather / The multitudinous seas in

⁴⁹ The bloodied hands of Still's farmer's may symbolize "the violence of unbelonging," and subsequently, "an obsession with questing." O'Hagan quoted by David Anfam in: Anfam, "Still's Journey," 68.

incarnadine, / Making the green one red."⁵⁰ The blood referenced in this quote and throughout the play is a metaphor for guilt. Still may have painted blood on the hands of his figures because of the guilt and internal struggle that American men felt between the world wars.⁵¹

As the economy continued to falter in the thirties, Americans increasingly questioned the artist's role in society.⁵² Beginning in the 1920s, however, a new multidisciplinary movement including writers, artists, and historians, began to dominate the arts in America. This movement was called Regionalism.⁵³ It remained dominant well into the 1930s as an "artistic and intellectual revolt against postwar urban industrialization."⁵⁴ Regionalist artwork was often comforting, particularly to middle and lower classes in need of validation. As Robert Dorman notes:⁵⁵

The regionalist search for folkness [came] to focus on the role that the pioneer played in America's cultural development as either agent or victim of catastrophism, consciously and unconsciously preserving, abandoning, adapting, or inventing ways of living in the vacuum of the frontier, changing the 'history and symbolism of political freedom' from a biblical, classical, and European story to an American one. For regionalists, the pioneer thus embodied the idea of culture as *process, evolutionary* process, from the static monistic organicism of Europe to the

⁵⁰ William Shakespeare, "Macbeth, Act II, Scene II," Lines 76-79. *University of Pennsylvania*, Published April 5, 1994, <http://bit.ly/1vPmLpH>.

⁵¹ This common internal struggle resulted in a new genre of literature called Modern Man literature, which flourished in the 1940s and 50s. Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 207.

⁵² Matthew Baigell, "The Beginnings of 'The American Wave' and the Depression," *Art Journal* 27, no. 4 (1968), 387.

⁵³ Baigell, "The Beginnings of 'The American Wave' and the Depression," 392.

⁵⁴ Robert L. Dorman, "The ReDiscovery of America The Regionalist Movement and the Search for the American Folk," in *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920-1945* (Charlotte: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 100.

⁵⁵ Regionalism provided them with the validation that their lives still had a purpose, that they were still a valued part of American society. Dorman, *Revolt of the Princes: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920-1945*, 33.

vibrant multiplicity of America, for example, or from an older oppressive order to a new, liberated one, or, in the view of the most catastrophist-minded, from culture to culturelessness.⁵⁶

Regionalist interest in the “folk” meant that rural life was usually celebrated over urban life.⁵⁷

Still’s sympathetic tie to Regionalism was in the shared belief that America needed to assert its independence and strength through art.⁵⁸ Thomas Craven promoted Regionalism and was “the principal ideologue of the American Scene” movement.⁵⁹ Craven held a profoundly anti-modernist stance on American art whereas Still was sympathetic to the Regionalist movement and he embraced a modern approach to art.⁶⁰ While Regionalists sought to create an American art, they failed to recognize the problematic side of rural America, and their message received criticism for being too romantic.⁶¹ As a rural-based pilgrim, Still sympathized with the

⁵⁶ Dorman, *Revolt of the Princes: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920-1945*, 84.

⁵⁷ For more on the concept of “folk” and antimodernism, see *Antimodernism and Artistic Experience: Policing the Boundaries of Modernity*, ed. Lynda Jessup (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2001).

⁵⁸ Grant Wood, “Revolt Against the City,” in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 435.

⁵⁹ Matthew Baigell, “The Beginnings of ‘The American Wave’ and the Depression,” *Art Journal* 27, no. 4 (1968), 387.

⁶⁰ Despite some differences in their approach to American art, Thomas Craven and Clyfford Still enjoyed a mutually respectful relationship. In the summer of 1934, Still visited Craven in New York before returning to Pullman, Washington. They enjoyed a three-hour conversation about art. Clyfford wrote, “I found him generous and capable in his criticism and most kindly as a man.” Clyfford Still in a letter to Elizabeth Ames, Sept 17, 1934.

⁶¹ Regionalism is an expansive topic that deserves a fuller discussion, however this is beyond the scope of this paper. For more information on regionalism see these sources: Dorman L., Robert. *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920-1945*. Charlotte: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993.; Craven, Thomas. “Men of Art: American Style,” in *The American Mercury*, December 1925, 425-432.; Meyer, Richard. “Mind the Gap: Americanists, Modernists, and the Boundaries of Twentieth-Century Art,” in *American Art* 18, no. 3 (2004), 2-7.; Doss, Erika. “Catering to Consumerism: Associated American Artists and The Marketing of Modern Art, 1934-1958,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 26, no. 2/3 (1991), 143-167.

movement, but he became disenfranchised with what he believed was the movement's lack of depth.⁶²

Social Realism was another popular art movement in the United States during the 1930s.⁶³ Similar to Regionalism, it retained an optimistic tone, particularly in its emphasis on the importance of America's farmers. Like Social Realists, Still believed that art had a role to play in reconstructing America in the aftermath of WWI and II. He felt the artist could promote a new vision for the future, however, he disagreed with the Social Realists' prescriptive approach.⁶⁴ The prescription was a heavy-handed criticism of systems or practices, such as mechanization of labour, that prevented the lower classes from overcoming their socio-economic circumstances. Still was conservative, and did not like to discuss his work in terms of politics.⁶⁵ Although Social Realism was arguably more purposeful than Regionalism, Still could not align himself politically with Social Realism's larger goals.

Still borrowed heavily from both Regionalism and Social Realism, but he did not quite fit into either of the two major art movements. Once again, Still was cast as an outsider. It may have

⁶² Specifically, Regionalism required representational art of its artists, and Still found this too restricting. Grant Wood, "Revolt Against the City," in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 435.

⁶³ Matthew Baigell, "The Beginnings of 'The American Wave' and the Depression," *Art Journal* 27, no. 4 (1968), 392.

⁶⁴ Herbert Read, "What Is Revolutionary Art?" in *Art Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 511.

⁶⁵ "Like no other artist, he avoided the exhibition circuit." Thomas Kellein, "Approaching the Art of Clyfford Still," in *Clyfford Still 1904-1980: The Buffalo and San Francisco Collections* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1992), 9. For example, Clyfford Still did not want to participate in the 1958 group exhibition of "The New American Painting" because of "ideological reasons." *Clyfford Still* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979), catalogue of an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1979, 193-4.

been around this time Still realized that he wanted to transcend politics in his art altogether: “It has always been my hope to create a free place or area of life where an idea can transcend politics, ambition and commerce.”⁶⁶ Still featured rural life and farmers prominently in his artwork, but instead of showing a romantic notion of country-living, Still revealed the harsher reality of living in the prairies during the Great Depression. His somewhat dystopian vision disqualified him from any government commissions through the PWAP. Determined and committed to showing the world as he saw it, Still stuck to his early conceptual undertakings regarding Nature and trauma that would lead him to hero-status in San Francisco in the 1940s, to world class artistic leader in New York City in the 1950s, and to his eventual retreat from commercial success in Maryland, where he would hoard his life’s creations in a barn and away from public scrutiny until 2011.

The FSA and PWAP reached different audiences based on where the artworks were commissioned and how they were disseminated. For example, Dorothea Lange’s photographs could be sent to anyone in the country, whereas murals would have dominated the visual landscape of a specific city. It seems apparent that the effects of both the FSA and PWAP resonated with Still. Many of the muralists employed by PWAP took a cue from Mexican and Latin American counterparts, such as Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, as evidenced in Thomas Hart Benton’s Post Office Mural entitled *A Social History of Missouri* from 1936.⁶⁷ While it is possible that Still saw Benton’s murals in Jefferson City and elsewhere, Benton was a

⁶⁶ *Clyfford Still’s Paintings*, edited by Ti-Grace Sharpless (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1963), catalogue of an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, October 18-December 15, 1963.

⁶⁷ Still owned Justino Fernandez’s *Jose Clemente Orozco: Forma e Idea* (Mexico City: Libreria de Porrua Hnos. Y Cia., 1942).

also a widely known artist with a penchant for controversy and roots in Regionalism and Social Realism.⁶⁸

Benton was a mentor and teacher to Jackson Pollock during the 1930s. Pollock was, like Still, an artist from the midwestern United States that became famous in New York in the 1950s for his work as an Abstract Expressionist. Pollock was born in Cody, Wyoming in 1912 and tragically died in 1956 in a car accident caused by alcohol consumption. Pollock and Still became friends after Mark Rothko persuaded Still to move from San Francisco to New York in 1946. Pollock's artwork from the 1930s was similar to Still's insofar as it was an unflattering representation of rural life. *Man with a Knife* (c.1938-1940) could be a depiction of one man trying to injure another, or it could be a depiction of a man's internal struggle against himself. Both of these struggles were traumatic revelations. The 1930s was an important experimental period for these artists on their way to abstraction.

Though the word "experimentation" may seem to imply something more radical than representational painting, one must remember that, even as representational painters, the work by Pollock and Still was considered wildly experimental at the time. Rothko would later say that Still made the "rest of us look academic," referring to the abstract style he developed in San Francisco in the 1940s, born of the twin themes of nature and trauma that he obsessively mulled over through the 1930s. Increasingly disturbed by what he perceived the players in the commercial art market were doing to the Abstract Expressionists, namely, fuelling rivalries for more dramatic media stories, discouraging true innovation in favour of reproducing what had

⁶⁸ Socialist Realism was the official Soviet art form that was institutionalized by Joseph Stalin in 1934. Some Social Realist artists took on traits of Socialist Realism painting, and many artists quietly protested the destruction of Diego Rivera's New York mural *Man at the Crossroads* when a portrait of Lenin was found within it by his patron, the Rockefellers, in 1934.

become their signature style, and coldly offloading unsaleable artists, Still tried to help Pollock by encouraging him to stop drinking and move out of New York for a while.⁶⁹ Pollock's untimely death only further cemented Still's distrust of the art market and empowered his belief in painting for oneself.

Still retained his taste for experimentation for the rest of his life. His artistic progress through the 1930s was in no way linear, and his experimentation with the palette knife and brush differs noticeably from painting to painting, becoming more dramatic as his stylistic priorities shifted from one painting to another. Many of the early paintings that use the palette knife have a surface texture like smooth peanut butter expertly laid on toast, while later works take on a thicker, more aggressively-applied appearance. Paintings from the 1920s feature landscapes with surprising textural qualities, such as *PH-782* (Fig.1).⁷⁰ The focus of this painting is in the depth and texture of the earth and sky, and was a more effective way for Still to convey the immensity and awe of the prairie landscape than a detailed and refined rendition. Still's realization that texture and grandiosity outshines meticulous accuracy marks the beginning of the young artist's coming of age, confidently demonstrating his own style on the periphery of Regionalism.

⁶⁹ Michael Auping, "Clyfford Still and New York: The Buffalo Project," in *Clyfford Still 1904-1980: The Buffalo and San Francisco Collections*, ed. Thomas Kellein (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1992), 23-24.

⁷⁰ *PH-443* is another train scene from 1927 where Still employs a similarly minimal composition so that the viewer's focus can linger on his thick use of oil paint to create an animated, textural landscape painting. *PH-623* (1929-30) is a third early attempt using the same style and subject matter.

Reminiscing over his years in Alberta, Still wrote poetically:

...I joined the earth and the sky. There came a fullness of comprehension, a banishment of trouble — a resolution of all meaning. And it was without limit, for the horizon did not enclose, nor the spaces terrify, nor the senses corrupt. All about me was the fullness of time and the present became one with eternity. Vanities and hopes, the ache and dirt of numbing work, despair, and pleasures, — all were cleansed from the heart and eyes. It was the memory and knowledge born of these uncorrupted moments that even yet brings confirmation and hope when courage wanes before the weight of anxiety and assault.⁷¹

The above quotation reveals the young Still as a wide-eyed and inspired individual deeply moved by life in the prairies. This side of Still has often been overlooked. In part due to his mythological outsider status and his growing notoriety for having a hostile disposition, the newspapers nicknamed him the “Prairie Coriolanus.”⁷² Art critics also picked up on this and referred to him as the “Coriolanus of the Art World.”⁷³ As an ambiguous figure both feared and admired, it was perhaps not farfetched a characterization. Much of the social unrest during the 1930s was rooted in class struggle. Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* focuses on the struggle between the plebeians and patricians during Rome’s transition from a monarchy to a Republic. Purposefully ambiguous and lacking a clear tragic-hero, it is likely that Still could identify with this play because of his outsider status in everyday life and in the art world. There was a similarly tense socio-political situation in the United States that Still likely felt torn between. On the one hand, Still was adamant that an artist should only paint for oneself, and on the other hand, he laboured over a strategy for creating a legacy that would outlast him. Additionally, Still was a capitalist but was completely disturbed by what he perceived as the commercialism of the

⁷¹ Still, Clyfford. *Clyfford Still’s Journal notes, 1956*. Journal notes. The Clyfford Still Museum archives.

⁷² Robert Hughes, “Prairie Coriolanus,” *Time Magazine*, February 9, 1976.

⁷³ Robert Hughes, “The Tempest in the Paint Pot,” *Time Magazine*, November 26, 1979.

New York art scene. *Coriolanus* provided Still with a relatable scenario in which the characters and setting did not fall into neatly packaged binaries. Still painted a real and tortured world that he rediscovered through Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*.

Still felt like an outsider for most of his life, misunderstood and under-appreciated. The artist's role was questioned by those outside the arts because of its seeming frivolity in an age when many struggled to earn a living. The mentality slowly changed as public art projects transferred one's daily interaction with art from the private space to the public space. The public view of Still also changed: "As for the artist who refuses any concept of himself other than his own, he is neatly elevated to myth."⁷⁴ Still firmly believed in creating art for himself, and felt little need to explain the meaning behind his artworks. He felt as long as he painted for himself there would always be a reason to paint.

Transportation systems were essential to one's livelihood during the Depression and, appropriately, trains were among Still's earliest and strongest visual influences. Tracing back to some of his earliest paintings of prairie landscapes with freight trains and their infinite smoke trails, Still's paintings are often spoken of in terms of "verticality."⁷⁵ Defying nature, he paints the train's coal smoke billowing straight up instead of blowing back over the train cars as it speeds forward. The smoke is painted all the way to the top edge of the canvas in an endless vertical line of smoke, as shown in *PH-782* (Fig.1). Freight trains were a central element of the visual landscape of the prairies, especially during the Great Depression (Fig.2). Trains

⁷⁴ *Clyfford Still's Paintings*, edited by Ti-Grace Sharpless (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1963), catalogue of an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, October 18-December 15, 1963), 10.

⁷⁵ Michael Auping, "The Buffalo Project," in *Clyfford Still 1904-1980: The Buffalo and San Francisco Collections*, ed. Thomas Kellein (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1992), 34.

transported basic goods to and from the otherwise isolated mid-western Canadian provinces and, illegally transported unemployed men heading east to Toronto and New York in search of gainful employment.⁷⁶

Verticality remained a key component of Still's work even as the figure disappeared completely toward the 1950s. The vertical elements are often described as "lightning bolt-like strips" that run through the paintings, or as a reference to the upright standing figure conquering nature, as in *PH-235* (Fig.3). The vertical outlasts all other figural elements in Still's work and he famously stated that "the figure stands behind it all."⁷⁷ In consideration of Still's description of the vertical lines as his "life lines,"⁷⁸ I suggest a third interpretation; Still is referring to the necessity of travel for survival, as evidenced by the trains deeply embedded in his childhood memories.⁷⁹ The train's smoke acts as a smoke signal that invites you to the train and the opportunity for it to extend your life line. Still said: "Art is an exertion of man's freedom in a hostile world."⁸⁰ This theme becomes increasingly prevalent as his paintings become more abstract.

⁷⁶ Michiel Horn, "Relief Problems in Western Cities: Foreigners, Single Men, Single Women and Graduating Students," *The Dirty Thirties: Canadians in the Great Depression* (Toronto: Copp Clark Publishing, 1972), 263.

⁷⁷ David Anfam, "Clyfford Still's Art: Between the Quick and the Dead," *Clyfford Still: Paintings 1944-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 25. Eye imagery is the other remaining figural element in his abstract work. More on this in Chapter Two.

⁷⁸ Michael Auping, "Clyfford Still and New York: The Buffalo Project," *Clyfford Still: 1904-1980: The Buffalo and San Francisco Collections*, ed. Thomas Kellein (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1992), 39.

⁷⁹ Figure 2 is one of many photographs Still took of trains and train tracks while living in Alberta. He kept these photographs among those of his family and the farm he grew up on, and they are now housed at the Clyfford Still Museum archives in Denver, Colorado.

⁸⁰ "The Aloof Abstractionist," *Time*, November 29, 1963.

As with the freight trains he painted from observation, Still looked to the local farmers and labourers for subject matter. He was raised on a farm and understood their physical burdens. He relates, “we worked the wheat until we were bloody to the elbows.”⁸¹ Many of the figures he painted have red hands, as depicted in *PH-651*. The red hands, sometimes extending up the arms, also references the dangerous work experience that was so common for agricultural labourers.

Another interpretation of the bloody hand motif is revealed in an oil painting entitled *PH-228* (Fig. 4). In this painting, a man holds a dagger as he sits astride a boar with blood spewing from the animal’s jugular, and the man’s pair of bloodied hands stretch outward in the crucifixion position. Across many cultures, the boar is symbolic of courage, so Still’s depiction of a man slaying a boar represents overcoming of fears and weaknesses. Still was likely familiar with the Homeric poems, and a variety of stories about war from the Indigenous Peoples of the Northwest Plateau, where the boar plays an important part in the morals or lessons.⁸² In the late 1930s, symbolic imagery reflecting the anxiety around war would have been particularly relevant. *PW-5* (Fig. 5) from 1930 also shows two boars, both hanging with one shown from the front and the other from the back. This watercolour is one of several existing artworks depicting dead or dying boars, showing Still’s preoccupation with the theme of overcoming one’s fears.

The boar motif in *PH-228* sheds light on a period when Still was using representational imagery for specific symbolic purposes. If we are to interpret the man’s posture and the boar’s

⁸¹ Dean Sobel and David Anfam, “Still’s Journey,” in *Clyfford Still: The Artist’s Museum* (New York: Skira Rizzoli Publications, 2012), 79.

⁸² Columbian Plateau Native Americans of eastern Washington, specifically the tribes of Nespelenis, Chelos, and Colades, were influential to Still for their strong commitment to the spirit quest and the hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 92.

presence as quasi-religious, and in response to war, the apparent slaughter of the boar reveals a paradox. The man sacrifices himself to protect civilization, but in order to do so he must overcome his humanity. *PH-229* is one other known painting from the 1930s that features a boar, this time shown dead and in the process of being gutted and skinned while hanging (Fig. 6). We are voyeurs - watching the man from behind as he performs a ritual. He leans unabashedly close to the boar's corpse, his left hand reaches into the gut of the beast while his right hand balances comfortably on the animal's chest. The man's head follows his left hand, and leans in so close that his head appears to be inside the boar. The boar's symbolic potential presents us with the ancient practice of donning animal skins to adopt that animal's perceived attributes or strengths. In donning the skin of a boar, that would mean acquiring the attribute of courage. Dressing in the skin of a freshly killed animal was common among South American pre-Columbian cultures such as the Olmec, and the Indigenous Peoples of the Northwest Plateau often performed a variation of this practice as well.⁸³ David Anfam has already suggested Still's interest in South American culture in his reflection on *PH-275* (Fig. 7) and the green object's similarities with an Olmec were-jaguar baby (Fig. 8).⁸⁴ Still's depiction of a man performing the ritual of becoming a boar reveals his understanding and coping of a desperate economic and social climate during the interwar years.

⁸³ John F. Scott, *Latin American Art: Ancient to Modern* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), 110.

⁸⁴ Dean Sobel and David Anfam, "Still's Journey," in *Clyfford Still: The Artist's Museum* (New York: Skira Rizzoli Publications, 2012), 81.

FIGURES FOR CHAPTER ONE



Figure 1. Clyfford Still, *PH-782* 1927. Oil on canvas, 24.87 x 35.87 in. (63.16 x 91.10 cm)
Photo: Ben Blackwell. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate.



Figure 2. Photograph taken by Clyfford Still, Rail road tracks, Alberta. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate.



Figure 3. Clyfford Still, *PH-235*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 105 x 92 1/2 in. (266.7 x 235 cm)
Photo: Ben Blackwell. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate.

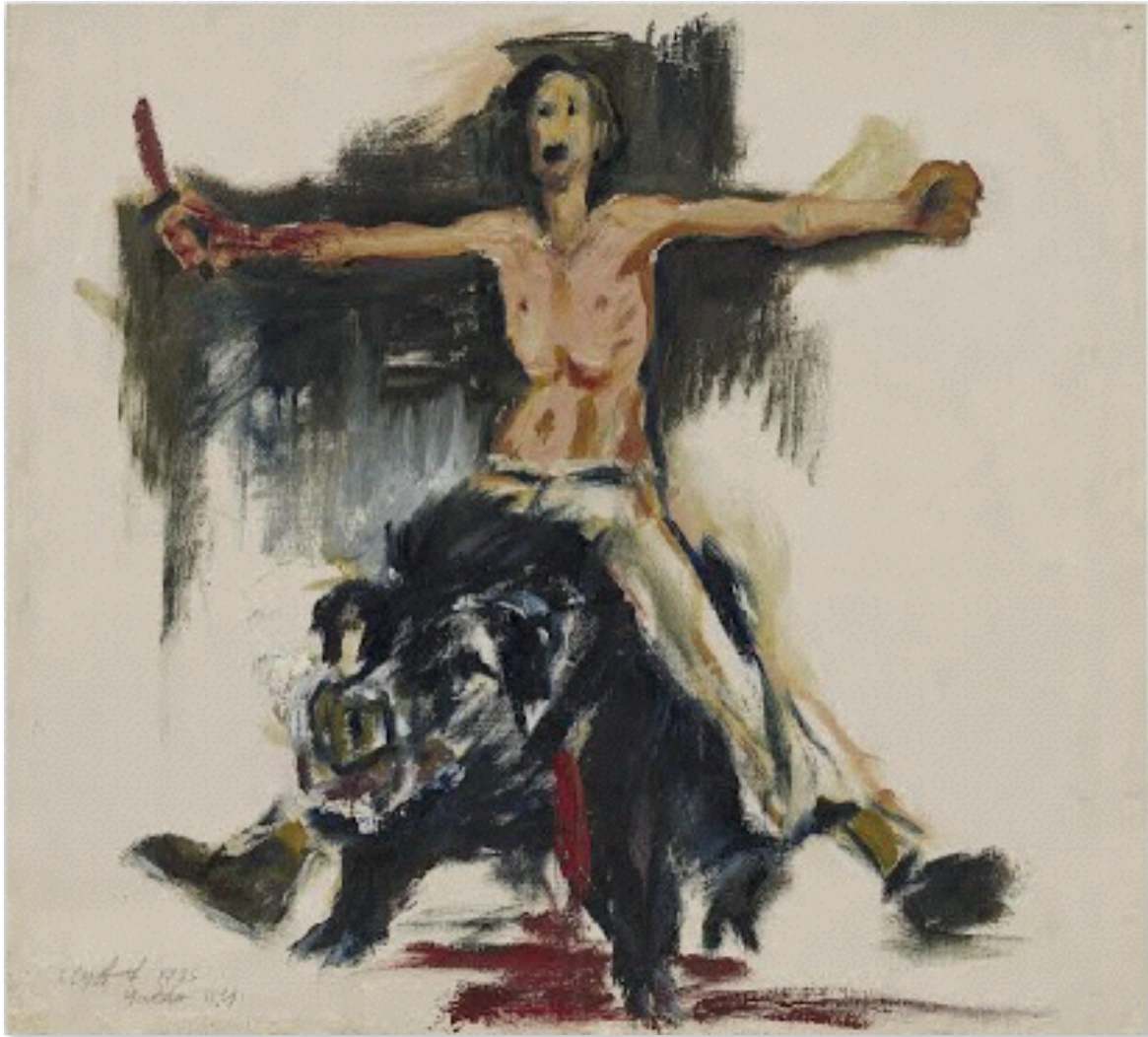


Figure 4. Clyfford Still, *PH-228*, 1935, Oil on window shade, 10.75 x 8 in. (27.30 x 20.32 cm)
Photo: Ben Blackwell. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate.



Figure 5. Clyfford Still, *PW-5*, 1930, Watercolour on paper, 12.25 x 9.62 in. (31.11 x 24.43 cm)
Photo: Ben Blackwell. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate.



Figure 6. Clyfford Still, *PH-229*, 1935, Oil on window shade, 9.25 x 10 in. (23.49 x 25.40 cm)
Photo: Ben Blackwell. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate.



Figure 7. Clyfford Still, *PH-275*, 1935, Oil on canvas, 36.13 x 22.88 in. (91.77 x 58.11 cm)
Photo: Ben Blackwell. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate.



Figure 8. Altar 5, La Venta, 1000 BCE-1 CE, Olmec, Mexico.

CHAPTER TWO

Inspiration Beyond the Canon, 1933-1941

*“To struggle, to be lost within himself - In trepidation, from the blank abyss - To look with bodily eyes and be consoled.”*⁸⁵ Wordsworth

2.1 YADDO SPRINGS, New York: Summers of 1934 and 1935

In the summers of 1934 and 1935 Clyfford Still was invited to Yaddo Saratoga Springs. Yaddo Springs is an exclusive artist retreat founded in 1900 as communal space for leading artists to hone their craft.⁸⁶ During Still’s visits, attendees included visual artists, composers, performing artists, and filmmakers.⁸⁷ Those two summers were very helpful for Still to work without the distraction of teaching, and, as the only painter, he could do so without the drama of rivalry.⁸⁸ He was surrounded by artists who provided stimulating conversation without being direct comparisons because of their preferred medium. The artistic diversity at Yaddo helped propel Still’s thinking about the link between his representational style and goal of painting the deeper truth hidden within the visible world. As Still put it: “From another momentarily emancipated position I was able to collect my resources and begin an intense probing of the

⁸⁵ William Wordsworth, *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1892), 314.

⁸⁶ Patricia Still, “Clyfford Still: Biography,” in *Clyfford Still: 1904-1980: Buffalo and San Francisco Collections*, ed. Thomas Kellein (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1992), 146.

⁸⁷ Artists working at Yaddo during the summers of 1934 and 1935 include Bernard Haggin, James T. Farrell, Joseph De Martini, Peter Neagoe, Roy Harris, Clara Stillman, Jean Liberte, Agnes Tait, and Leonard Ehrlich. Still, *Clyfford Still: 1904-1980: Buffalo and San Francisco Collections*, 147.

⁸⁸ Clyfford Still expressed his distaste the New York City art scene because of the destructive rivalry between artists. Dean Sobel and David Anfam, “Why a Clyfford Still Museum?,” in *Clyfford Still: The Artist’s Museum* (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2012), 24. In a letter to Elizabeth Ames after his visit in 1934, Clyfford Still wrote of his pleasurable summer, saying “Yaddo has given me friends to paint for.” Still, Clyfford. *Clyfford Still to Elizabeth Ames, Sept 17, 1934*. Letter. The Clyfford Still Museum.

potential of the instrument I had intuitively chosen as an open means in a field of closed alternatives.”⁸⁹ Still experimented freely with various painting styles, techniques, and media at Yaddo Springs: “I want to speak as directly, as simply, as honestly, as I can... Whatever is necessary to accomplish this end I justify. Paint, paper, wood, any material, any method - abstraction, realism, singly or combined in any way necessary to accomplish the function I consider valid.”⁹⁰ During this experimental period he learned that some media were more effective for displaying his themes and motifs.

Still’s woodcuts are potentially the most revealing of his evolving thematic concerns. Similar to a stamp, a woodcut contrasts colour with negative space to reveal a whole image. Figure 9, a woodcut Still created in 1937, demonstrates this technique. Still transposed the idea of a woodcut image into his painting style, as is apparent in *PH-547*, created in 1943 (Fig. 10). Woodcuts create an effect of light and dark, which Still emphasizes in his woodcuts to symbolize inner conflict. By minimizing details in *PH-547*, Still depicts a fragile shadow-of-a-man who mirrors the sentiment of many people during the interwar years. The trauma from the world wars revealed some of the problems with previously accepted stereotypes and norms. For example, before the wars, all that was “modern” was irrefutably better than all that was “primitive.” However, Still and others began to recognize benefits and detriments in both sides.

⁸⁹ Clyfford Still notes on his stay at Yaddo Saratoga Springs, printed in the 1979 catalogue for the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Still’s handwritten notes typed by Patricia Still for record-keeping purposes, remains separate from the catalogue and kept with his notes. Accessed from The Clyfford Still Museum archives, July 2014.

⁹⁰ Still, Clyfford. *Clyfford Still’s Journal notes, Richmond, Virginia, January 11, 1944*. Journal notes. From The Clyfford Still Museum.

2.2 PULLMAN, Washington, 1933-1941

Still was well educated and, despite occasional work-related grumblings, he seemed more comfortable in academic circles than in the commercial art world.⁹¹ He graduated from a preparatory school run by Spokane University before earning an MFA with a thesis on Cezanne in 1933.⁹² Between 1933 and 1941, Still taught painting in California, Washington, and Virginia, at the San Francisco Art Institute, Washington State University, and Virginia Commonwealth University, respectively. In summers and time off he traveled to Alberta and New York to visit friends and family and, to sketch.⁹³ During this time he also founded, directed and taught at an art colony in the Nespelem Indian Colville Reservation with a colleague from Washington State University, and maintained correspondence with peers across Washington.⁹⁴ Still's travels were deliberately limited to North America, as he resisted any European art influences in an effort to develop a specifically American art form.⁹⁵ Instead of borrowing from European examples, he

⁹¹ Still, Clyfford. *Clyfford Still to Elizabeth Ames, Sept 17, 1934*. Letter. From The Clyfford Still Museum archives.

⁹² Patricia Still, "Clyfford Still: Biography," in *Clyfford Still 1904-1980: The Buffalo and San Francisco Collections*, ed. Thomas Kellein (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1992), 146. Still writes of Cezanne as a "provincial 'primitive' who made the best of his limited gifts" and for his "honest and ultimately more original plastic 'means to power.'" Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 93.

⁹³ Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 93.

⁹⁴ Jeff Creighton, *Indian Summers: Washington State College and the Nespelem Art Colony, 1937-41* (Pullman: WSU Press, 2000), 15.

⁹⁵ Although Still vocalized his distaste for European art generally, his animosity was primarily targeted at French modern artists. Still was unimpressed by Andre Breton upon their meeting in New York, notably because "[Breton] refused to speak English." Still refused an invitation to represent the U.S. at the Venice Biennale (1957). Dean Sobel and David Anfam, "Why a Clyfford Still Museum?," *Clyfford Still: The Artist's Museum* (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2012), 26.

looked to the cultural history of the United States and Native Americans for inspiration.⁹⁶ Still was not alone in his dream to create an American art; the desire was shared across art movements and periods, including Regionalism and Social Realism and eventually, Abstract Expressionism.

This desire reached beyond artists and immediate arts professionals, as even politicians capitalized on what they believed was art's ability to unite the American population during the Great Depression. President Franklin Roosevelt developed the Farm Security Administration (FSA), which ran from 1935-44. The mandate included introducing "America to Americans" by emphasizing the contribution of rural America to the prosperity of the country. Roosevelt also enacted the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) program in an effort to keep artists employed during the Great Depression, and it ran from December 1933 until January 1934.⁹⁷ These programs helped many artists establish their careers and assisted in skyrocketing some of them to fame in the 1940s and '50s.⁹⁸

Supervisors Roy Stryker and Edward Bruce of FSA and PWAP respectively, determined that commissioned art should be of "the American scene."⁹⁹ Stryker and Bruce favoured utopian

⁹⁶ Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 116

⁹⁷ FSA and PWAP were both part of the New Deal. The New Deal was a series of domestic programs enacted by the federal government in the United States between 1933 and 1936. For more on the FSA see: Baldwin, Sidney. *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* Charlotte: University of North Carolina Press, 1968. For more on PWAP see: Bruce, Edward. "Implications of the Public Works of Art Project," *Magazine of Art* 27, no. 3, March 1934, 115.

⁹⁸ For example, Thomas Hart Benton and Jackson Pollock.

⁹⁹ "American scene" refers to iconic subject matter of American life, such as landscape, farming, and the benefits of capitalism. W.E.W., "The New Deal and the Arts," *Archives of American Art Journal* 4, no. 1 (1964), 4.

scenes showing a pleasant crossroads of plentiful rural life and a bustling urban marketplace.¹⁰⁰ Arguably, the programs rewarded the artists whose artwork best fit this political agenda, rather than the most technically skilled or those with the most compelling ideas. FSA and PWAP both required artists to have professional experience, meaning that commercial artists, such as printmakers formerly employed for advertising, were most likely to benefit from these programs.

Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans are two of the most famous photographers commissioned by the FSA, and the two who most likely influenced Still.¹⁰¹ Both sought to capture a vision of the heroic farmer as the backbone of America, and meticulously staged many of their photographs in order to capture characteristically American moments. Lange became most famous for *Migrant Mother* (Fig.11), one of many photos she took of a nomadic family of eight. Lange strategically photographed four: the mother, her two younger children, and an infant. This was printed because it brought the plight of the rural poor into the living rooms of the urban elite. By choosing to photograph only two or three children, the image reflected the idea of the nuclear family and would evoke empathy from the viewing public. If Lange had photographed all six children it would have had the opposite affect, and would have undermined the sense of national unity that the program was trying to create. Figure 11 shows a preliminary photograph taken while Lange worked out the final composition.

Migrant Mother is comparable to Still's *PH-275* (Fig.7). It shows an ageless female, breasts exposed, holding a turquoise-green elongated object. A mother holding a child is one of the oldest iconographical symbols in art history, most typically known through the image of the

¹⁰⁰ W.E.W., "The New Deal and the Arts," 4.

¹⁰¹ Dean Sobel and David Anfam, "Still's Journey," in *Clyfford Still: The Artist's Museum* (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2012), 79.

Virgin Mary and baby Jesus. Sometimes these figures are depicted in a way that foreshadows death in some cultures. *PH-275* also shares many similarities with Mayan (Olmec) visual culture, such as the Were-Jaguar baby¹⁰² (Fig.8). The Were-Jaguar baby was often depicted in a caretakers arms and, like the boar of Northwest Plateau imagery, symbolizes sacrifice, transformation, and the life cycle. Greenstone was prized by the Olmec for use in bas reliefs and sculptures, but it is unclear why.¹⁰³ *PH-275* is a synthesis of Christian, Native American, and Still's personal history with sacrifice, rebirth and transformation, and represents Still's effort to create a uniquely American visual language.¹⁰⁴

Walker Evan's photograph *Sharecropper's Family, Hale County, Alabama* from 1935 (Fig.12) shows a rural family of six posing indoors. Still's *PH-81* (Fig.13) is strikingly similar. The photograph, like Still's painting, is compositionally balanced by an elder and an infant. The mother and child motif is foremost in both. Even though Still was already experimenting with this motif, it is possible that he looked to Evans' work for more inspiration. The infant in *PH-81* is positioned precariously in his mother's arms at a similar angle, and with his legs hanging over the mother's right knee. Both babies appear too big for their mothers' laps. *PH-81* shows a family of seven posing in front of a wooden house. The standing male figure in overalls dominates the scene, and is a reoccurring character in Still's paintings from this period. He is the

¹⁰² Scholar Anatole Phorilenko has suggested the term "composite anthropomorphic" to replace the term "were-jaguar" however both are accepted. John F. Scott, *Latin American Art: Ancient to Modern* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), 28.

¹⁰³ Scott, *Latin American Art: Ancient to Modern*, 29.

¹⁰⁴ This imagery resonated with Still because he had a baby sister who died at only four days old. Dean Sobel and David Anfam, "Still's Journey" in *Clyfford Still: The Artist's Museum* (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2012), 79.

only person wearing work boots or footwear of any kind, representing his status as the sole source of financial income. Evans' photograph also features shoeless people. The figures' disproportionately large feet and hands show that this is a family of labourers with seemingly few other employable skills. The elder is shown seated beside the infant, each generation forced to rely on another that has nothing of its own to give. Still paints their faces long and drooping. Painting long faces to express sadness may seem overworked or literal, but Still was experimenting with methods of representing an atmosphere that could not be described concretely. Evan's photograph and *PH-81* each represent a circle of life; sacrifice and rebirth.

Despite similarities in composition and subject matter, the mood of the two images are quite different. Unlike the optimism of Evans' photograph, where the family appears naively proud to represent the "backbone of America," Still's painted family seems unwillingly trapped within the only lifestyle known to them. Still references these kind of images when explaining his abstract work: "the figure stands behind it all."¹⁰⁵ Still painted the inner struggle and difficulties faced by everyday North Americans. He did this first in a representational style, and eventually stripped his paintings down to reveal the internal.

While *PH-81* demonstrates the similarities between Still's work with that of PWAP commissioned artists, *PH-80* (Fig.14) equally demonstrates his unwillingness to manipulate his vision for political propaganda. In *PH-80* (1935) two men sit, one stands, and one girl kneels in profile. The central figure is shirtless and his ribs and shoulder bones protrude, revealing a very emaciated man who would have otherwise been muscular from his work as a labourer. His weak

¹⁰⁵ David Anfam, "Clyfford Still's Art: Between the Quick and the Dead," in *Clyfford Still: Paintings 1944-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 25.

body is propped against a short wall behind him and his legs flop haphazardly in front of him. His head tilts backward as it would if he were lying down, and his large red hands are crossed in front of his body.

A white skull peers out from behind a male figure who is positioned like a corpse in a coffin. The proximity of the skull to the man, combined with his morbid body language, references the ubiquity of death during the Dust Bowl. The kneeling girl laments this man's death as a representation of loss and struggle in the United States. Moreover, the painting's composition draws on Christian iconography, specifically from the scene of the crucifixion, for dramatic effect and meaning. The central figure symbolizes Christ, the mourning girl represents Mary Magdalene, and the two male figures stand in as St. Peter and St. Paul. The crucifixion imagery is reinforced by the horizontal machinery above the central figures head in reference to the arms of the cross, and the jagged metal spikes from the machinery on the right graze his head like a crown of thorns, or rays from a halo. The same diagonal lines with a semi-circular curve appears in later and more abstract paintings, *PH-78* from 1935, *PH-211* from 1936, and *PH-342* from 1937. The only lighter colour tones in the sky come from the rays emanating from the halo. This is not a natural source of light given the unrealistic purples and dark blues below and above it.

The seated man to the viewer's left is more self-conscious than the central figure. He hunches forward wearily but is reflecting on the object he holds gingerly in his right hand. While the viewer cannot actually see an object in his hand, the way that the seated figure's hand is positioned in *PH-653* from 1934 is comparable to that of the man in *PH-80*. The held object is visible in *PH-653*, showing that the hand's position is not merely a gesture or coincidence. The

unidentifiable object is reminiscent of Still's 1925 figure study of rocks, *PH-45* (Fig.15). The rocks in *PH-45* are rich orange, red, and gold hues bathed in the warmth of the setting sun. The mound of rocks is piled on top of the only vegetation in the painting. The vegetation is the only visible sign of life or growth and it struggles to absorb the sun under the weight of the rocks. At first sight, the rocks are glowing, warm and beautiful, a welcome feature of the natural landscape. A second look reveals their nuisance, persistence and detrimental effect on life and growth. Farmers needed to remove rocks from their fields so that they would not get caught in machinery or prevent growth. *PH-45* is one of Still's earliest and most subtle attempts at showing the unpleasant reality underlying the seemingly heroic life of American farmers. The male figures in *PH-80* and *PH-653* are holding the same sun-kissed rocks as a symbol of their daily labours in arid agricultural conditions. In *PH-653*, the seated figure's left hand clutches at the edge of the machinery he sits on, showing that despite his weakened position he is in an active pose.¹⁰⁶

The standing male figure in overalls and a long white shirt with menacing eyes rests his right hand on the wall that supports two other male figures. He also holds an object, its yellow-gold gleaming out from the hand's grasp. This object looks similar to the one found in *PH-653* and the hand's grip is comparable whereas the seated man in *PH-80* has a tighter grip with curled fingers and the object is not visible at all. This painting demonstrates the American crisis of faith at the time. The martyr figure is dying for nothing, the left seated figure is hopeful, the standing figure is stoic but realistic, and the female figure representing female and childhood loss of

¹⁰⁶ David Anfam describes Still's figures as "active" or "passive" depending on their body language. Anfam, "Still's Journey," 74.

innocence. Not only do these paintings fly in the face of a cheery American future imagined by PWAP, but they also deny the optimism that characterizes the Social Realism art movement. The Christian symbolism alluded to in *PH-81* in the form of the Virgin Mary and Child, and in the form of crucifixion imagery, represent sacrifice, transformation and rebirth as Still experienced it in the Midwest.

Still was not operating alone in the west, as his New York contemporaries suggested in the 1950s, but he did not waver from his own convictions or viewpoint, especially regarding subject matter so personal to him.¹⁰⁷ Even though the FSA and PWAP achieved some success in bringing art closer to the American public, the government programs were ultimately unsuccessful in creating an American art form. The political interest in using art as a tool for propaganda superseded the desire to support and develop local arts. As the leader of the New York School and Abstract Expressionism, Still succeeded in doing what the American government did not achieve; that is, create an enduring legacy of “American Art” that existed beyond the immediate scope of his own oeuvre.

¹⁰⁷ *First Exhibition - Paintings: Clyfford Still*, edited by Mark Rothko (New York: Art of This Century, 1946), catalogue of an exhibition at Art of This Century Gallery, New York) 1946.

2.3 NESPELEM ART COLONY, Washington, 1935-1936

*“In a sense, all the paintings are self-portraits. The figure stands behind it all until eventually you could say it explodes across the whole canvas. But by then it’s something else, of course, a whole new world, for which there are no words.”*¹⁰⁸

Clyfford Still

In his attempt to create a self-referential American Art, Still sought out and connected with Native American culture. Geographic proximity allowed him to learn about and observe the Northwest Coast Aboriginal peoples, specifically the peoples of the Colville Federation of Tribes in Nespelem, Washington. Still co-founded the Nespelem Art Colony with Washington State University colleague Worth Griffin around 1937.¹⁰⁹ The mission of the colony was to create a field school where Still and Griffin could teach drawing and painting, while studying and recording the “dying” Northwest Coast Aboriginal culture.¹¹⁰ There, Still studied Native Americans within their habitat, as an “artist-ethnographer.”¹¹¹ Still was sympathetic to Native peoples because of his own history as an outsider living off the land in a modern world. Although his interest in Native American culture was deeper and more specific than many of his contemporaries, such as Pollock and Rothko, he could not overcome the popular colonial discourse in his artistic and ethnographic approach at the colony.¹¹² Still taught amateur and

¹⁰⁸ David Anfam, “Clyfford Still’s Art: Between the Quick and the Dead,” in *Clyfford Still: Paintings 1944-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 25.

¹⁰⁹ Jeff Creighton, *Indian Summers: Washington State College and the Nespelem Art Colony, 1937-41* (Pullman: WSU Press, 2000), 15.

¹¹⁰ Creighton, *Indian Summers: Washington State College and the Nespelem Art Colony, 1937-41*, 15.

¹¹¹ The term “artist-ethnographer” is applied to Kandinsky in: Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky and Old Russia: The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 1.

¹¹² Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock were interested in the concept of Primitive generally, and were inspired by a wide range of groups they regarded as “primitive,” such as African Americans and ancient Romans. Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 27.

professional white artists to draw and paint Native Americans, without learning Native American art forms or styles or even teaching Native Americans the Western artistic techniques that could have led them to employment opportunities.¹¹³ Much like an ethnographer, he was there for field work, penetrating their lives without embracing their lifestyle.

Still was exceptionally private about the art that he produced at Nespelem. Students and teachers who were with him rarely saw his work, if at all.¹¹⁴ He meticulously and skillfully produced portraits and figure studies, as well as some scenes of dilapidated houses. Even though part of the motivation for founding the art colony was to record the culture for educational purposes, neither Still nor Griffin created entirely realistic renditions of people or places. Still's portraits resembled the sitter, however, he took creative liberties in the details to reveal what he believed was their personality or soul. Most of the sitters are unknown today, apart from a few chiefs or important elders. However, Still sketched or painted mostly formal women's portraits. Portraiture as a genre is typically reserved for the depiction of important male figures in a society. The large number of female portraits that Still painted may suggest his recognition for the importance of the female's role in the tribe's culture. Many of these portraits ended up in a solo exhibition of his work from Nespelem in 1936.¹¹⁵ Although some artworks are recorded as "lost," it is possible that they were simply sold in the exhibition and Still did not want to stray

¹¹³ Creighton, *Indian Summers: Washington State College and the Nespelem Art Colony, 1937-41*, 15.

¹¹⁴ Creighton, *Indian Summers: Washington State College and the Nespelem Art Colony, 1937-41*, 17.

¹¹⁵ This solo exhibition was called "An Exhibition of Pastel Portrait Studies Painted During the Summer of 1936 on the Colville, Blackfoot, and Flathead Reservations." Listed are twenty-two pastels with portrait sitter's name, four sketches, and four oil paintings, titled by location. The Clyfford Still Museum archives, accessed July 24, 2014.

from the message he engendered about painting for oneself and no one else.¹¹⁶ He taught this message to his students at Nespelem, proof that his myth of narrative painting for oneself was already part of his creative methodology.¹¹⁷ Letting it be known that he sold artwork would make him appear hypocritical.

The portraits from Nespelem represent the best examples of Still's early interest in depicting eyes. Notably, the portrait of *Mary Owhi, 118, Yokima Tribe, Nespelem (PD-55)* (Fig. 16) shows an elder woman with her eyes closed.¹¹⁸ Still describes this woman in greater detail than anyone else in his field notes from Nespelem.¹¹⁹ This portrait may have been a turning point for the way that Still treated eyes because he realized that they do not need to be visible to have a strong presence. The eyes in many of the earlier 1930s figures are rectangular or squinting, and the beady circular shaped eyes replace them as the figures become more abstract. Perhaps Still did not view the farmers in his art as victims of WWI or the Great Depression, but passive and anonymous participants in a cruel world. Most of his figures have black or dark recessed voids where the eyes would be, and a few have shiny beady white dots floating in empty black sockets. The absence of eyes in both side profiles and frontally facing figures is consistent throughout the

¹¹⁶ Clyfford Still's second wife, Patricia Still, painstakingly recorded and catalogued all of his work, including photographs, assigning codes, and even providing miniature colour sketches of the artwork and pasting it to the outside if it was a large rolled canvas. The artwork from the 1930s is catalogued in the same manner, with the appropriate codes, photographs and descriptions of the work with the date and place that it was created.

¹¹⁷ Creighton, *Indian Summers: Washington State College and the Nespelem Art Colony, 1937-41*, 17.

¹¹⁸ The portrait of *Mary Owhi, 118, Yokima Tribe, Nespelem (PD-55)* was included in "An Exhibition of Pastel Portrait Studies Painted During the Summer of 1936 on the Colville, Blackfoot, and Flathead Reservations."

¹¹⁹ Still, Clyfford. *Clyfford Still's Field notes from Nespelem Art Colony, "Saturday" to "Monday" June 1936*. Field notes. From The Clyfford Still Museum archives.

1930s. If the eyes are the window to the soul, then Still's figures had none. The importance of eyes in Still's work is evident in its being the last recognizable part of the human figure to remain in his late abstract work.

Still's portraits from Nespelem range from quick sketches to elaborate pastel drawings. His skill as a draughtsman allowed him to expertly render the subtlety of texture and colour in each person's face and skin. His portraits were usually traditional busts, cropped at mid-chest, so he completed separate sketches in order to study Native American clothing in search for motifs.¹²⁰ In the portraits, clothes were often roughly drawn to visually complete the portrait, and do not compare in technical skill to the sitter's face. Even though he keenly and meticulously recorded Aboriginal individuals, he often characterized white men in a vulnerable state. Still's white male figures are not stoic or accomplished modern men; they are shortsighted, cold and exposed to the harsh elements, as in *PH-651* (Fig.18) (1934). It shows four Clydesdale work horses following a naked and sickly man, standing rigidly before them. The sketchy and broad brush stroke shown in *PH-651* suggest a kind of purgatorial middle ground where both man and beast await their freedom. Their eager body language reveals their desire to transcend their circumstances.

The figures in Still's paintings do not appear comforted by the presence of other figures. Actually, the groups of 2, 3 or more seem more pathetic than the individual figures. They stare aimlessly, and their body language is passive. The group mentality demonstrates dismissiveness and entitlement; someone else needs to solve the problem, so they all wait. The individual figures are portrayed as mentally stronger because of they are typically shown with more active body

¹²⁰ See *PP-493* for Still's pastel sketches of Native American clothing (Figure 17).

language. In other words, the individual figures are usually shown standing, walking, or at least trying to (*PH-230*), whereas many figures in groups are shown sitting or leaning. The individuals take responsibility for themselves because there is no one else to do so. This celebration of the individual over the group speaks to Still's conservative political tendencies. He was unique among his artistic peers in this regard, especially in the 1930s as many artists sought to express their hopes for the US through Social Realism. Still discouraged political interpretations of his work and this was a reason for his resistance to group shows. He felt that many group shows had a political angle and that each artist and their respective work was tainted by the overall message of the show. He felt it was therefore impossible to interpret an artist's work in any other way when exhibited in a group show. Still's resistance to participating in group shows may seem over reactionary, however the interwar period was inherently politicized and art was overtly used for propaganda. Still's emphasis on the role of the individual over that of the group is reflected in his attitude to exhibitions where he preferred the solo show to the group show.

Western approaches to the depiction of Native American culture varied in subject matter and treatment. Still committed most of his time to portraits while in Nespelem, whereas his contemporary, Emily Carr (1871-1945), focused on the natural landscape and totems of the Native villages she visited. This difference in interest and approach can be understood by comparing each artist in relation to James Clifford's concepts of dwelling-in-traveling and ethnographic surrealism.

Carr believed, like Still, that it was important to paint Native Americans and their culture for posterity. Both artists felt that modern man could learn something essential from primitive

cultures before they went extinct.¹²¹ Carr was a Canadian artist and writer best known for her paintings of Pacific North West Coast Native American totems and landscapes.¹²² Despite chronic illnesses, she traveled to Europe, across Canada, and into Native villages for artistic and spiritual inspiration.¹²³ In a lifelong journey to get closer to God, she found spirituality in nature and in painting it.¹²⁴ Ahead of her time, she adopted a French avant-garde style despite harsh criticism out west, making her feel somewhat isolated.¹²⁵ While Carr and Still felt like outsiders in their own culture, they felt so as well in the Native communities they engaged with. Carr spent time living in Native villages as a child and this greatly effected her approach to painting. She was given the name “Klee Wyck,” meaning “the laughing one,” by a villager and was more or less accepted by the community.¹²⁶ When Carr was young, a Native American told her that painting a portrait of a person robbed that person of their soul. With that realization, Carr turned to painting totems and nature entirely.¹²⁷

¹²¹ Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 93.

¹²² Maria Tippet, *Emily Carr: A Biography* (Toronto: Oxford University Press Canada, 1979), ix.

¹²³ Unlike Still, Carr embraced French Avant Garde and Modern art and drew much of her inspiration from the artists she met and the time she spent there. Upon returning to Canada, she studied under Mark Tobey, an American artist who was sympathetic to both her North American roots and her European education. Tippet, *Emily Carr: A Biography*, 167.

¹²⁴ Tippet, *Emily Carr: A Biography*, 29.

¹²⁵ Tippet, *Emily Carr: A Biography*, 141.

¹²⁶ Emily Carr, *The Emily Carr Collection: Four Complete and Unabridged Canadian Classics*, intro. Ira Dilworth (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2002), 17.

¹²⁷ Carr, *The Emily Carr Collection: Four Complete and Unabridged Canadian Classics*, 18.

The work of Emily Carr and Clyfford Still can be discussed in terms that James Clifford described as “ethnographic surrealism.”¹²⁸ Clifford describes ethnographic surrealism as “a modern orientation toward cultural order...taking as its problem—and opportunity—the fragmentation and juxtaposition of cultural values.”¹²⁹ Additionally, Clifford says: “To see culture and its norms—beauty, truth, reality—as artificial arrangements, susceptible to detached analysis and comparison with other possible dispositions, is crucial to an ethnographic attitude.”¹³⁰ Carr and Still were both working alone in western North America, fascinated by Northwest coast Native American culture but unable to completely shed familiar social constructs and influences. As outsiders, however, they would have seen many norms as “artificial arrangements,” and understood that the world had become “permanently surrealist.”¹³¹ Clifford’s explorations of ethnography and surrealism are rooted in the 1920s and ‘30s and his definitions of ethnography and surrealism are broad enough to serve as an effective open door into Still’s interwar artwork without pigeon-holing him. In *Traveling Cultures*, Clifford discusses the complexity of “collection and identity formation in the west.”¹³² Still and Carr do not collect physical objects from the Native reserves and villages they visit, rather, they “collect” culture through appropriation of imagery. In his field notes, Still records his surprise when he discovered

¹²⁸ James Clifford, “Ethnographic Surrealism,” in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (New York: Cambridge University, 1981), 540.

¹²⁹ Clifford, “Ethnographic Surrealism,” 539.

¹³⁰ Clifford, “Ethnographic Surrealism,” 541.

¹³¹ Clifford, “Ethnographic Surrealism,” 541.

¹³² Margaret Armstrong, “Review of The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art by James Clifford,” *The Journal of Religion* 69, no. 4 (1989), 598.

the absence of dolls, trinkets, or other collectibles on the Colville reserve.¹³³ Instead, he copied everything he saw from life in his sketchpad, which he later mined for motifs. Carr, on the other hand, did not seek or expect collectible objects, her appropriation of Native North West Coast totem poles in painting received more positive attention from art circles than the actual totem poles.

Emily Carr's *Strangled by Growth* from 1931 (Fig.17) shows a section of a totem pole enveloped in vegetation. Could this be Carr's vision of a dying race, returning to the earth, without her enacting the disrespect of painting a specific person? Just enough of the totem pole is shown to reveal a human-like face and a hand, grasping at the shaft of a stick or spear. The greenery moves around the totem like a hungry snake, constricting its neck and body. Pushing through the vegetation is the totem's face proud and strong, its fist engaged. This can be interpreted as the Native Americans' losing battle against colonialism and modernization. Carr's deep empathy for Native peoples began as a child and developed into adulthood, which she learned to express with creativity and in a modern style that held affinities with surrealism. *Strangled by Growth* is rife with binaries: native and white man, man and nature, internal struggle, life and death. Both ethnography and surrealism provided the mid-twentieth century world with alternate perspectives and approaches to life, politics and art.

By the time Still was working in the Nespelem Art Colony, anthropology and ethnography had reached a pinnacle in popular discourse, and globalization's effects had made the world seem smaller. Still's field notes from his time at Nespelem describe a friendly yet

¹³³ Still, Clyfford. *Clyfford Still's Field notes from Nespelem Art Colony, June 1936*. Field notes. From The Clyfford Still Museum archives, 3.

“tragic people,” who reluctantly sat for portraits in exchange for money or gifts, such as cigarettes for adults and ice cream for children.¹³⁴ The racially charged power dynamic between Still’s crew of mostly white males and the Native American locals likely compelled locals to sit for a portrait. The only person Still encountered who refused to sit for a portrait in exchange for “good pay” was what Still described as a “new Indian,” more ornery than the others and aimlessly checking his watch.¹³⁵ Still, like Carr, found his greatest solace in the *in-between*, where their identities could be negotiated and they could experiment freely with their artwork. Their identities were not rooted to a specific socially constructed ideal; they were dwellers-in-travel.

Still’s colleague, Clay Spohn, referred to him as an “Earth Shaker” in the 1940s, but it was not until Mark Rothko wrote the forward in the catalogue of Still’s first exhibition in New York that the discourse of Native American mythology truly took over the meaning of his work.¹³⁶ Rothko adopted the concept of “artist as ethnographer and shaman” to discuss Still and his work.¹³⁷ Even though Still’s style was completely abstract by the 1950s, figural and Native American motifs were being developed for a decade before Rothko “discovered” Still in San

¹³⁴ Still, Clyfford. *Clyfford Still’s Field notes from Nespelem Art Colony, June 1936*. Field notes. From The Clyfford Still Museum archives, 4.

¹³⁵ Still, Clyfford. *Clyfford Still’s Field notes from Nespelem Art Colony, June 1936*. Field notes. From The Clyfford Still Museum archives, 4.

¹³⁶ Anfam, “Of the Earth, The Damned, and of the Recreated: Aspects of Clyfford Still’s Earlier Work,” 264.

¹³⁷ Polcari explores the idea of Still as shaman in depth. Appropriately, a shaman is a journeyman: “The shaman’s soul goes on long journeys to the sky or the underworld.” Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 96.

Francisco in 1943, lending credibility to Rothko's interpretation.¹³⁸ The exhibition was at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century Gallery after Rothko introduced Still to Guggenheim.¹³⁹

Recognizing Still's naivety to the New York art scene, she warned Still of allowing another artist to write the forward.¹⁴⁰ Feeling indebted to Rothko for his introduction to Guggenheim, Still ignored her warning.¹⁴¹ The media picked up on Rothko's interpretation immediately, and to Still's horror, it completely overshadowed the depth of his artwork. Outraged, he protested to Rothko so vehemently that Rothko "later dropped it in relation to his own work as misleading and irrelevant."¹⁴² But the catch-all phrase persisted for the remainder of Still's career.¹⁴³

In 1913 America was introduced to European Modern Art in a big way. The Armory Show in New York exhibited many of whom we now consider to be the Modern Masters, including Henri Matisse, Paul Cezanne, Edgar Degas, Georges Braque, and Wassily Kandinsky, among others. Still would have only been nine years old at the time, and would later denounce all European influences, yet it was an event that would shape the course of Modern art in America in the following years, precisely as Still was coming of age as an artist. The Armory Show's influence may in fact have pulled him in two directions. It may account for some of

¹³⁸ *First Exhibition - Paintings: Clyfford Still.*

¹³⁹ *First Exhibition - Paintings: Clyfford Still.*

¹⁴⁰ Still, Clyfford. *Clyfford Still's Journal notes, New York, New York, Fall 1945.* Journal notes. From The Clyfford Still Museum archives.

¹⁴¹ Still, Clyfford. *Clyfford Still's Journal notes, New York, New York, Fall 1945.* Journal notes. From The Clyfford Still Museum archives.

¹⁴² Still, Clyfford. *Clyfford Still's Journal notes, New York, New York, Fall 1945.* Journal notes. From The Clyfford Still Museum archives.

¹⁴³ Still, Clyfford. *Clyfford Still's Journal notes, New York, New York, Fall 1945.* Journal notes. From The Clyfford Still Museum archives.

Still's impatience with incessant comparisons between American and European artists. He wanted to develop an American art that could stand on its own, representing purely American issues, ideals, and criticisms within a global context.¹⁴⁴ Any hints of influences were methodically churned through Still's mind until something completely new resulted. While many ingredients may appear in other recipes, Still's creations were completely his own. However, Still lived to experience WWI, the Great Depression, and WWII, all of which fostered global exchange, making it impossible for him to have worked in a vacuum.

Kandinsky sought to define a culturally specific artistic expression in his Russian roots. He was a trained ethnographer and studied traditional ways of life and folklore.¹⁴⁵ Kandinsky reached the American public by way of the Armory Show in 1913 in New York City, nearly a decade before Still eagerly made his first of many trips throughout his lifetime to the east coast. He was a founder and participant of the Blaue Reiter group in Germany from 1911-1914. This group was fundamental to Expressionism and was made up largely of Russian emigres with a few native Germans. For Kandinsky, blue is the colour of spirituality, and while many of the artists in the group varied stylistically, the common goal was to express spiritual truth.¹⁴⁶ After

¹⁴⁴ The idea of creating an independent American Art was common among American artists beginning in the 1930s and continuing into the 1950s. Despite the popularity of this motive, others recognized the impossibility of separating oneself from art history and the influence of other artists. In 1944, Jackson Pollock said in an interview conducted by Robert Motherwell, "The idea of an isolated American painting, so popular in this country during the '30s seems absurd to me...the basic problems of contemporary painting are independent of any country." Martica Sawin, "New York, 1944-45: Young Cherry Trees Secured Against Hares," in *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginnings of the New York School* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), 347.

¹⁴⁵ Art Historian Peg Weiss wrote of Kandinsky's commitment to the subject matter of his youth and cultural traditions as the basis for a life long exploration throughout his artistic career, in "Kandinsky and Old Russia: The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman," 1.

¹⁴⁶ Auping, "The Buffalo Project," 37.

WWI, Kandinsky moved to the US where he started a new group, the Blue Four, and he lectured across the US beginning in 1924.¹⁴⁷

While taking a cue from Kandinsky's approach, Still played with shapes and forms that are reminiscent of Kandinsky's abstract work. Still may have recognized that Kandinsky explored his roots in many different artistic styles, including early representational work and then becoming increasingly abstract.¹⁴⁸ This is similarly the path that Still found himself on: a lifelong interest in cultural roots with a desire to express the intangible through art.

On Still's journey to find his own expressive style he briefly crossed the line from conceptual influence to literal, as is shown in *PH-342* (Fig.18) from 1937. In *PH-342*, an anthropomorphic figure appears to kneel, half-heartedly operating basic farm equipment. One hand props himself up while the other rests on the end of the abstracted equipment. The subject matter strongly resembles his earlier work, an anemic, ribby, bloated naked figure hopelessly waits at the ready by unused farm equipment. The watercolour-washed appearance juxtaposed against the sharp dark lines bisecting the image are stylistically quite similar to Kandinsky's signature style from his Blue Rider period (1911-1914), as in *White Cross* (Fig.21). This experiment would only last a short time, but must have felt significant enough for Still to keep these artworks, rather than destroy them as he did to much of his earlier work. His harsh dismissal of artist influences may be because he viewed his work as an oeuvre, or journey, rather than individual artworks, and therefore any recognition would be crediting them for something much larger than what it may otherwise seem. Admitting to Kandinsky's influence, therefore,

¹⁴⁷ Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky and Old Russia: The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 1.

¹⁴⁸ Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 110.

would not just mean he influenced a particular period, or series of paintings, but would have meant that another artist changed the course of his entire life. Still's pride and unchanging views would not allow this; for him it was all or nothing.

Even as the realism of Regionalism was overtaken by Social Realism, Still's apparently dark and menacing paintings contrasted the optimism presented by many of his Regionalist peers and successful FSA and PWAP applicants. The nightmarish quality of the paintings would later give way to something more subtle with more obvious reference to life rather than death. His left wing contemporaries were painting utopian visions of a reformed world, while Still recognized the role that modern, capitalist, conservative society had in the global warfare and its instigation, he still saw this as the best option. Social Realism was dominated by optimism, but Still's personal experiences would take him in another direction. By the mid-1930s, Still's paintings focussed on a human aimlessness, anxiety, and the idea of purgatory on earth.

FIGURES FOR CHAPTER TWO



Figure 9. Clyfford Still, *PB-I*, 1937. Woodcut, 8 x 10 in (20.32 x 25.4 cm) © Clyfford Still Estate.



Figure 10. Clyfford Still, *PH-547*, 1943. Oil on paper, 18 x 12 in. (45.72 x 30.48 cm) Photo: Ben Blackwell. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate.



Figure 11. Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother* series, 1936. Reproduction number LC-USF34-9093-C. www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa1998021552/PP/



Figure 12. Walker Evans, *Sharecropper's Family, Hale County, Alabama*, 1935. Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 13. Clyfford Still, *PH-81*, 1935. Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 ins (121.92 x 152.4 cm) Photo: Ben Blackwell. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate.



Figure 14. Clyfford Still. *PH-80*, 1935. Oil on canvas, 48.25 x 59.87 ins (122.55 x 152.06 cm)
Photo: Ben Blackwell. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate.



Figure 15. Clyfford Still, *PH-45*, 1925. Oil on canvas, 21 x 28.12 ins (53.34 x 71.42 cm) Photo:
Ben Blackwell. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate.



Figure 16. Clyfford Still, *Mary Owhi 118, Yokima Tribe, Nespelem (PD-55)*, dimensions in inches (in cm) Photo: Ben Blackwell. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate.



Figure 17. Clyfford Still, *PP-493*, 1936. Pastel on paper, 8.5 x 11 ins (21.59 x 27.94 cm) Photo: Ben Blackwell. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate.



Figure 18. Clyfford Still, *PH-651*, 1934. Oil on window shade, 6.75 x 9.75 ins (17.14 x 24.76 cm) Photo: Ben Blackwell. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate.



Figure 19. Emily Carr, *Strangled by Growth*, 1931. Oil on canvas, 25.19 x 19.13 ins (64 x 48.6 cm) © Vancouver Art Gallery.



Figure 20. Clyfford Still, *PH-342*, 1937. Oil on canvas, 43.5 x 39.5 ins (110.49 x 100.33 cm)
Photo: Ben Blackwell. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate.



Figure 21. Wassily Kandinsky, *White Cross (Weisses Kreuz)*, 1922. Oil on canvas, 39.9 x 43.9 ins (100.5 x 110.6 cm), © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

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