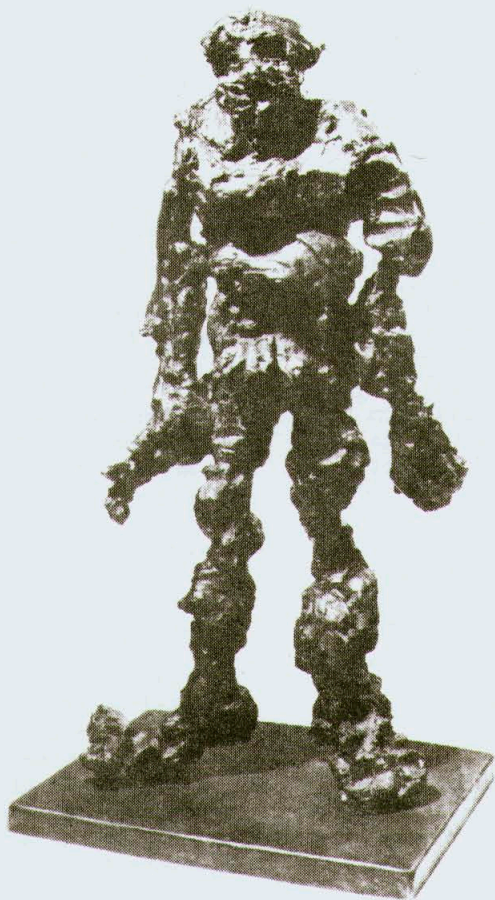


Willem de Kooning
MATRIX 15

Wadsworth Atheneum
December January 1976

Clandigger, 1972



This installation of recent works by Willem de Kooning suggests that the artist, now in his early seventies, continues to create complex and powerful images, at times savage in their intensity.

The most unexpected development in de Kooning's late career has been his new interest in sculpture. In 1969, the same year he painted the Atheneum's Montauk I, he was in Italy and visited a friend who had a small foundry. He was invited to try his hand with sculpture. The result was thirteen "Little Pieces" as they are now sometimes called. Each is only five to seven inches high.

It is not likely that he would have pursued this casual encounter with the medium had not Henry Moore, on a visit to New York the following year, admired these initial efforts and encouraged him to explore sculpture on a larger scale. Clamdigger, on view in MATRIX, was his first major piece.

De Kooning was one of a handful of influential abstract expressionists whom the critic Harold Rosenberg called "Action Painters." In fact, Rosenberg later said that de Kooning's improvisations provided the model for the concept of "Action Painting." Loosely speaking, these phrases were meant to designate their common interests in the act of painting and to pinpoint the drama of those highly charged moments when the artist confronts the canvas.

The artist's manipulation of the paint was a focal point for these artists. This is important to recall because the primacy of the artist's touch - de Kooning's distinctly tactile assault upon the clay - is key to the evocative strength of his sculpture.

Another influential aspect of de Kooning's work over the decades has been his ability

to explore abstract forms in some works while, at the same time, exploring frankly figurative or landscape motifs in other works. The large new canvas, Untitled XI painted this year, does not represent a major change in direction for de Kooning. Rather it stands as a rich variation on his continuing interest in high-keyed color abstractions in which the paint is furiously manipulated and willfully re-worked. The result of all this activity is a diversity of surface textures. The paint appears variously pitted, matted and wrinkled, swirled, dripped and raked.

It is important to the artist that in the intentional ambiguity of his abstract forms lurk chance reminders of human figures, animals and landscapes. Says de Kooning, "Even abstract shapes must have a likeness."

Willem de Kooning was born in Rotterdam in 1904. When he was twelve he was apprenticed to a firm of commercial artists and decorators and shortly thereafter began eight years of conventional training in night classes at the Rotterdam Academy of Fine Arts and Techniques. In 1926 he came to the United States as a stowaway aboard a Holland-America liner. For many years he worked as a house painter and window display designer. In 1935 he spent a year with the Federal Arts Project (W.P.A.) and for the first time was able to paint full-time. Although he had to resign because of his alien status, the experience was responsible for his decision to devote total energies to his painting. By the end of the forties, he was well-known as one of the founders of abstract expressionism.

Willem de Kooning lives in The Springs, Long Island and is represented by Fourcade, Droll, Inc. of New York City.

Works in MATRIX:

Clamdigger, 1972, bronze,
57" x 30" x 21 1/2". Lent by
Fourcade, Droll, Inc., NYC.

Head No. 3, 1973, bronze,
19 1/2" x 11 3/4" x 11 1/2".
Lent by Fourcade, Droll,
Inc., NYC.

Montauk I, 1969, oil on canvas,
88" x 77". In the collection
of the Wadsworth Atheneum.

Untitled XI, 1975, oil on
canvas, 77" x 88". Lent by
Fourcade, Droll, Inc., NYC.

Other works by de Kooning
currently on exhibition in
the Atheneum's third floor
Contemporary Gallery:

Standing Man, 1942, oil on
canvas, 41 1/8" x 34 1/8".
In the collection of the
Wadsworth Atheneum.

Villa Borghese, 1960, oil on
canvas, 80" x 70". Lent by
Mr. & Mrs. Burton Tremaine.

[An] air of ambivalence and
profundity surrounds the
Clamdigger, a stolid, glower-
ing figure of Neanderthaloid
maleness. De Kooning recounts
that the idea for this work
came to him while he was
bicycling near the beach at
Montauk, Long Island. In the
distance, lit from behind by
a bright sun, he saw men with
clamdigging tools standing in
the shallows. The hulking
torso and spindly limbs of the
Clamdigger thus reproduce the
effect of a figure viewed
against a harsh back-light.
But this vision does not
account for the massive genitals
and extremities, which, taken
together with the relatively
feeble-seeming arms and legs,
have a strong symbolic over-
tone. They suggest a kind of
basic incapacity compensated
for by a potential for unthink-
ing violence; the Clamdigger
may be seen as an avatar of
dumb rage. But, again, it
would be a mistake to think
that any single exegesis could
exhaust the meanings of an
image so rich in content.

Peter Schjeldahl
De Kooning drawings/sculpture

Selected one-man exhibitions:
Egan, NYC '48; Boston Museum
School, DeKooning Retrospective
'53; Smith College Museum of
Art, Northampton Willem de
Kooning '68; Museum of Modern
Art, NYC '68 (also to Tate
Gallery, London; Stedelijk
Museum, Amsterdam; Art Insti-
tute of Chicago; Los Angeles
County Museum of Art); Walker
Art Center, Minneapolis de
Kooning drawings/sculpture '74
(travelled extensively).

Selected group exhibitions:
Museum of Modern Art, NYC
New Horizons in American Art
'36; Venice XXV Biennale '50;
Museum of Modern Art, NYC
The Art of Assemblage '61;
Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford
Continuity and Change '62;
Los Angeles County Museum of
Art, New York School: The
First Generation. Paintings
of the 1940s and 1950s '65;
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
NYC New York Painting and
Sculpture: 1940-70 '69.

Hundreds of books, catalogues,
articles and reviews have been
written about Willem de Koon-
ing and his work. The follow-
ing books are the standard
references on his work to date.
All include comprehensive
bibliographies about de Koon-
ing as well as listings of
the artist's own published
letters, interviews, state-
ments and writings:

Hess, Thomas. Willem de Koon-
ing. George Braziller (New
York) '60.

Janis, Harriet and Blesh,
Rudi. De Kooning. Grove Press
(New York) '60.

Hess, Thomas. Willem de
Kooning. Museum of Modern
Art (New York) '68.

Rosenberg, Harold. Willem
de Kooning. Harry N. Abrams
(New York) '73.

Larson, Philip and Schjel-
dahl, Peter. De Kooning draw-
ings/sculpture. E.P. Dutton
(New York) '74.