

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB

WORKS ON PAPER



ADOLPH GOTTLIEB, IMAGIST

Adolph Gottlieb's life in art was long—about fifty years long, in fact—and it was robust throughout its many phases. He was smart, tough, and intellectually uncompromising—a pro, as Tom Hess said. His early representational style shifted into abstraction through the distillation and fragmentation processes of his Pictographs, and he spent the rest of his life strengthening the resonance of his abstract imagery, which remained vigorous and relevant to the end. Gottlieb's compacted object-images embody great complexity within simple forms. In this, and in other ways, they are like Imagist poetry as it was defined by Ezra Pound—thought complexes fused into dense, energy-charged clusters and directly, instantaneously presented. The ability to create powerful, iconic “poetic-objects” separates Gottlieb from some of his Abstract Expressionist peers—from Jackson Pollock, who painted force lines and energy fields; from Willem de Kooning, who seemed to embed fragments of matter in a maelstrom; and from Franz Kline, who was essentially a non-objective painter—but it allies him with others, particularly Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman, whose best work also has an iconic and a poetic presence. Many of the School of Paris painters Gottlieb admired painted poetic objects, but Gottlieb's achievement was to do so on an American scale, in an American style.

Born in 1903, Gottlieb was one of the elders of Abstract Expressionism. His parents were a second generation away from their Jewish immigrant ancestors and were well established in the middle-class business and intellectual circles of the Bronx. Gottlieb, like many others of the third generation, rejected most of what his parents stood for; he dropped out of high school at seventeen and took off to Europe to study art firsthand. On his return in the early twenties, he studied with John Sloan at the Art Students League and by 1926 was beginning to attract notice as an exhibitor in group shows. His early work was dark, rugged, and mildly expressionistic. Sloan, of course, but also Matisse, Cézanne, and Leger seemed to be hovering over his shoulder. It is of utmost importance that Gottlieb got his experience of historical art on his own in the churches and museums of Europe, and of modern European art in the Parisian galleries, before he went to art school. Unlike other painters of his generation, he wasn't dependent upon reproductions in the latest issues of *Cahiers d'Art* for inspiration or sources in contemporary European art, and he was able to maintain more distance from the mesmerizing influence of Picasso as a result. Then too, Sloan encouraged the broadest possible approach to art, telling his students to look at Velázquez and the other bravura painters, but also at Cubism and even primitive art, especially Native American and Pre-Columbian Mexican art.¹

In France Gottlieb had spent a good deal of his time in Sylvia Dietz's bookshop,² and back in New York he was involved with writers as well as with painters. He knew many painters from the Art Students League, including John Graham, but his close friends were Otto Soglow, creator of “The Little King,” Alexander Borodulin, a writer and art critic, his own cousin Cecil Hemley, a precocious young poet who became an important literary editor, and Barnett Newman, with whom he haunted the Metropolitan Museum of Art when they weren't discussing poetry. In fact, Newman, Hemley, and Gottlieb met weekly to read and talk about contemporary poetry and literature, including (very significantly, I believe) T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and, probably, James Joyce.³ A second study group was a literary society formed by Newman, photographer Aaron Siskind, painter Max Margolis, and writer Leo Yamin

at City College, which they called Clionia. Gottlieb was not an official member since he wasn't attending the college, but he did frequently join their discussions.⁴

During these years of intense literary study, Gottlieb's paintings reflected a literal interpretation of the poetry he was reading. Many of the imaginary landscapes of the late twenties were, he told Dorothy Seckler, based on T. S. Eliot. "It had something to do with poetic themes, lonely figures. One of them was called *Man and Sea*. This nude figure standing on the beach with a very heavy metallic kind of sea. Very moody."⁵ *The Wasteland*, 1930, is a painting that practically illustrates Eliot's "Unreal City under the brown fog of a winter dawn" where "the last fingers of leaf clutch and sink into the wet bank" and "the wind crosses the brown land unheard."⁶ What better picture of the emotional desolation of the depression than this painting or these words?:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.⁷

Gottlieb was writing poetry himself in those years, though none has survived, so he was undoubtedly absorbing both imagery and structure as he read. The hard clarity of Imagist poetry, its simple directness, is reflected in Gottlieb's work, which was characterized by its vigor, its bold, firm, no-nonsense attitude from the very beginning. His pre-art-school *Portrait of Moe* (fig. 1) indicates his tendency to separate each object from its neighbor by heavy dark lines to make the viewer aware of its thingness. A Picasso-like fearlessness, apparent in the mixing of several styles within a single work, seems evident in his drawn self-portrait of circa 1923 (fig. 2). Writing about Gottlieb's first solo exhibition at the Dudensing Gallery early in 1930 (he had won the show with Konrad Kramer in a nationwide contest the year before), Carlyle Burrows said, in response to the solidity of the objects in the pictures, that Gottlieb had a tendency "toward an essentially vigorous form of three-dimensional painting," adding that the work "affect[ed] to redress with weight and boldness what it lacks in refinement."⁸

Critics noticed Gottlieb's "dynamic expression and intensity" early on, but "expressionism" wasn't a term commonly employed in describing his work until 1934, when he was showing with Gershon Benjamin, Helen West Heller, Louis Harris, Mark Rothko, Vincent Spagna, Yankel Kufeld, and other like-minded "moderns" at Robert Ulrich Godsoe's Uptown Gallery and, later, his Secession Gallery. His work was often singled out in the thirties for its aggressiveness and use of distortion, but he had used almost as much exaggeration in the more realistic figure studies he had done early in the twenties. The forms are flatter and much more simplified in the thirties, but much of that distortion is done for formal—and even playful—reasons, in the manner of his friend Milton Avery, and not for purgative purposes or shock effect. Gottlieb is never a violent painter, even when, as with the Bursts, he's painting an explosive image. He is subjective, romantic perhaps, but never Expressionist with a capital "E" like Kirchner or Soutine. Gottlieb and Rothko were decidedly less expressionist than some of the other members of "The Ten"—

Ben-Zion, for instance—who were probably more affected by the German Expressionist painting on view at the Nierendorf, Valentin, and J. B. Neumann galleries, and in The Museum of Modern Art's 1931 exhibition *German Painting and Sculpture*. "French expressionism" by Picasso and Matisse was more to their liking.

The early to mid-thirties were the period of Avery's greatest influence on Gottlieb, as is evident in his light-filled circa 1932 *Portrait of Marcus Rothkowitz* (Mark Rothko) (fig. 3). Gottlieb had met Avery—eighteen years his senior—when they were both showing at the Opportunity Gallery in 1929. Rothko had also met Avery that year, and the three remained close for the rest of their lives, though the early thirties saw the most intense period of interaction among them. They met practically daily to sketch together, share meals, or just discuss each other's art and art in general. Avery usually painted at least a picture a day, so there was always something new to look at in his place.⁹ In Rothko's eulogy to Avery he said that the "walls were always covered with an endless and changing array of poetry and light," adding that "poetry penetrated to every pore of the canvas."¹⁰ Avery read aloud to his family nightly in those years, and thus the literary interest joined with the pictorial for all of them. Barnett Newman, Paul Bodin, George Constant, Vincent Spagna, and Joe Solman were all members of the Avery circle as well. Gottlieb sketched Rothko pretending to play the studio prop mandolin. Avery painted Rothko with flat, silvery ovals for glasses—an image that seems to reappear in Gottlieb's painting *Eyes of Oedipus* twelve years later.

Like Avery, the group found exotic subject matter at the circus during the winter—Avery's *Acrobats* of 1931 found a sister in Gottlieb's *Circus Girl* of 1938, for instance—and in the summers many joined Avery at Gloucester or other New England beach resorts. The two Gloucester studies on a page from circa 1935 (cat. no. 6) are typical of Gottlieb's Avery-inspired work at this time. It was basically a mutual support group, but certain specific formal and technical effects of the interaction are noticeable in Gottlieb's subsequent work: greater formal breadth, larger planes, fewer small units per picture; greater emphasis on contour, less on modeling; the habit of working from sketches, of using gouache on colored construction paper to make quick, freshly observed studies—all of which led to a liberation from the "preciosity" of a given work. Gottlieb's drawing of a *Seated Nude*, 1934 (cat. no. 5), which is a study for one of his major paintings from that time, shows the sweeping breadth and large shapes that Avery preferred, while the gouaches on colored paper Gottlieb did during his stay in Arizona a few years later indicate his continued use of that specific Avery technique (fig. 4).

Gottlieb also may have acquired something from Avery's softly-brushed color that he didn't get directly from Picasso or Matisse; certainly he began to use a lighter palette during these years. His approach to color, however, owes most to Hamilton Field's book on the supposed European coloristic tradition of using only a few dominant hues, as was practiced, for example, by Rembrandt and Delacroix. It is possible that more attention has been paid to Avery's influence than is actually warranted; often, one makes the mistake of seeing Avery's influence when the true source is actually Avery's as well—Matisse. This is especially true of Gottlieb's ultra-simplified Arizona still lifes, such as the gouache of two gourds on a table, *Still Life*, ca. 1938 (fig. 14), and the massive, Matissean nude in his circa 1939 etching (cat. no. 20). Idiosyncratic drawings like *Esther at Easel* of 1937 (cat. no. 7), however, do seem to relate directly to Avery's work.

But to extend Avery's effect on Gottlieb outside the thirties and into his late "color-field" paintings is probably mistaken. Gottlieb and his wife, Esther Dick, the painter he married in 1932, were living in Brooklyn and simultaneously involved with a Brooklyn-based group of artists around David Smith and Dorothy Dehner (whose charmingly naive, on-the-spot drawings of

her friends might be just as important—or unimportant—as Avery’s ultra-simplifications for Gottlieb’s “childish” figures of the thirties). The group included Louis Harris and Louis Schanker, Edgar Levy and his wife Lucille Corcos, and John Graham, a frequent visitor from Manhattan.¹¹ Graham was a source both of the primitive African art Gottlieb had begun to collect and of innumerable firsthand accounts of the latest goings-on in Paris. Graham—with Arshile Gorky,¹² Stuart Davis, and Smith—had evolved a hard-edged painting style out of Picasso and the Surrealists which was so characterized by the use of thick black bands that they were labeled the “stripe painters.” The gridded structures of paintings like Davis’s *Landscape*, 1932-35, can be seen as one of the important sources for Gottlieb’s Pictographs, as well as for many of Smith’s sculptures.

Numerous other thirties art phenomena were also likely influences on the structures of Gottlieb’s forties Pictographs, such as the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* at The Museum of Modern Art in 1936; the work of Torres García, Piet Mondrian himself, Ilya Bolotowsky, and some of the other less rigidly right-angled “purists” among the American Abstract Artists group, which formed that year; and even some of the more abstract members of “The Ten,” a loosely defined group of artists with whom Gottlieb frequently exhibited between 1935 and 1939. (Among the members of “The Ten,” who sometimes numbered only nine, besides Gottlieb and Rothko, were Bolotowsky, Ralph Rosenborg, Louis Schanker, Joseph Solman, Louis Harris, Lee Gatch, Karl Knaths, Ben-Zion, Jacob Kufeld, John Graham, and Nahum Tschacbasov.) Rosenborg’s pictures were often abstract grids containing recognizable imagery impacted within a dense cage of black bars. Schanker’s angular figures were heavily outlined and abstracted into rectilinear structures of a type not dissimilar to the cityscapes of Joe Solman. Solman’s *Red Fire Escape* and Rothko’s *Subway Scene*, both of 1938, and both characterized by repeated rectilinear frameworks, rectangle within rectangle, are typical of many such bounded, gridded paintings of 1937-39. Solman’s paintings are also full of enigmatic signals which find an echo in Gottlieb’s paintings of the next decade. Arrows, pointing hands, signboards, letters and numbers—and even, in one instance, a large eye, a sign for an oculist’s shop—all isolated from one another, seem to function as silent communicators of a coded message. Their muteness is important; silence pervades his urban scenes as it did those of Giorgio de Chirico, whom Solman recalls feeling a degree of influence from at this time, particularly in conjunction with his *Venus of 23rd Street*.¹³

Americans were well aware of Surrealism in the thirties, years before the Surrealists themselves arrived in exile as a result of World War II. Gorky and Graham felt it intensely, Gorky even using parts of a de Chirico painting in one of his own. Among the highlights were Salvador Dali’s extravagant “happening-like” openings as well as other Surrealist shows at the Julien Levy and Pierre Matisse galleries; Marcel Duchamp’s various installations and manifestations; and The Museum of Modern Art’s *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* exhibition in 1936—the year of the publication of Levy’s book *Surrealism* and also of the Brooklyn Museum exhibition *California Art: Oil Paintings in the Post-Surrealist Style*. Dali may have been the eye of the storm, but Joan Miro and André Masson (both of whom had shows at Pierre Matisse), Max Ernst, and de Chirico provided a calm but steady rain of new possibilities at its perimeter. Though Surrealism struck a responsive chord in subjective artists like Gottlieb, many others to both the right and the left disliked it. Nevertheless, by 1939 Holger Cahill could report about the New York World’s Fair that “a good many of the works indicate that Surrealist ideas and techniques have been assimilated into the stream of contemporary American expression.”¹⁴ Certainly the influence of Dali and de Chirico on Gottlieb’s late-thirties paintings is easily demonstrated. The boxed still

lives on the beach (such as the one for which the crayon drawing *Box and Sea Objects* (fig. 5) is a study) that Gottlieb painted on his return from Arizona in the summer of 1938 clearly derive from both Dali's *Illumined Pleasures* and paintings by de Chirico like *The Great Metaphysical Interior* and *Duo*.

The deliberately calculated symbolism and hyper-realism of California "Post-Surrealists" like Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeborg and the magic realism of French painter Pierre Roy, all of which were played up in American art publications of the day, have nothing in common with Gottlieb's work of the late thirties except a kind of dreamy quality. They all share a stilled, enigmatic ambience, but a calm and dream-like quality was being discerned in Gottlieb's paintings at least as early as 1935 when one reviewer asked, "What motivates the figures besides an aesthetic, formal impulse in the artist to meet the unreal, other world landscape of the painting? Not to plan, not to agitate, not to act, but just to be together and face infinity, without hope, without desire. This romantic escape idea is poetically expressed, but there is no comfort here."¹⁵ Gottlieb's most Surrealist works are characterized by the kind of "selective isolation [that is] analagous to the dream process in which the unconscious fixes upon essential parts of figures and objects and presents them integrally while detaching them from their familiar context"—by free association, that is, rather than narrative logic.¹⁶ Gottlieb's *Untitled (Sketchbook Page)*, ca. 1938 (fig. 6), with its Picasso-like heart-heads and symbolic Christian doodles, may be an early instance of the kind of selective isolation basic to the Pictographs.

Of course there's a possibility that just being in the desert landscape had a significant effect on Gottlieb's images. Certainly this seems to have been the case with a number of artists in the Southwest (T. D. Benrimo's Daliesque landscapes spring to mind). The Gottliebs went to Tucson, Arizona, for a nine-month stay in 1937 to clear up Esther's arthritic condition. They were very poor (he began to use cans of house paint because of this), they knew no one there, and they had nothing to see except the local Arizona State Museum, which was filled with Zuni pots, Navaho blankets, Kachina dolls, baskets, and old stagecoaches. Native craftwork, particularly the pottery, feature frequently in his 1937-38 works on paper, *Still Life* (cat. no. 17), for example, where their bold patterning prefigures the markings in his later Pictographs. Making the best of it, he wrote to his friend Paul Bodin on March 3, 1938, that he "wouldn't trade all the shows of a month in New York for a visit to the State Museum here," and he told Martin Friedman that

The emotional feeling of the place was like being at sea or living near the sea because you see so much sky around you ... you see the horizon for 360 degrees in a big circle, so that the desert is like the ocean in that sense. There's a tremendous clarity of light and at night the stars seem very close.¹⁷

Apparently he did not see any petroglyphs or rock paintings while he was there, but he obviously was well aware of them when he painted *Black Hand* in 1943 because he duplicates both the white on black and the black on white varieties that appear in rock paintings throughout the area. (Numerous other sources for this imagery should be noted here, including its use in Oceanic Art, in Picasso (see MacNaughton), and in the caves of Altamira. He probably did see the The Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa* shortly before he left for Arizona.)

During his stay in Arizona he made a progression from closed-off still lifes in an airless, compressed space to still lifes on a table in front of a window with slightly parted curtains, *Untitled* (cat. no. 13), for example. In another, slightly later gouache, an open window expanse behind the still life reveals a mountainous desert landscape, but there is no earnest attempt to convey deep

space. The objects Gottlieb picked up in the desert for use in his still lifes then and, on his return, in the Surrealist-influenced boxed still lifes were like detritus found on the beach—weather-worn, nameless shapes, dried hunks of cactus, bones, gourds, etc. He told Friedman he had “some vague notion about life and death, growth and energy at the time.” The objects didn’t look like real things, so the space he painted them in couldn’t look like real space either, he told Seckler. “It all became flattened out, much more flat than I had ever worked before.”¹⁸ (Critics and friends thought these paintings radically abstract on his return, and even he backed off temporarily from their lack of modeling and depth in the boxed still lifes on the beach of 1938 and 1939.) The still lifes have a sandy coloration which was related by people in New York to the desert; it goes into the Pictographs, as do the pottery designs with their graphic signs and the compartmentalizations of the Navajo weavings that he liked so much in the Arizona State Museum.

The period 1939-1940 was a crisis time for Gottlieb. The Brooklyn group had broken up, as had the Artists’ Congress, with which he had been deeply involved. His work was too abstract and too Surrealist for “The Ten,” and he was becoming increasingly subjective in his approach to content. He was desperately trying to find a way to break through into a new kind of painting style that would enable him to paint the objects that obsessed him in a new way. “I was looking for subjective images, stemming perhaps from the subconscious, because the external world ... had been totally explored in painting.”¹⁹ At this crucial turning point in Gottlieb’s art and life, his years of involvement with contemporary literature may well have helped him to see a way out of his dilemma. He remained close to his cousin Cecil Hemley, whose poetry is sparse, plain-spoken, and direct. Like that of the Imagists, Hemley’s poetry “presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.”²⁰ His *Fallen Crescent* is typical, though later and more like Gottlieb’s later paintings:

Here is a dull moon drifting on the sea A
sick moon, Washed by brine. It is myself I see. This fallen
crescent speaks to me With the tired tongue of one no longer
young. It is a waning moon, Staring into eternity Alone, Alone,
Mourning the endless circles it has flown Down opal cloudways
That are now dark with storm. This is a fogging moon, Becoming
stone, A sombre red of sorrow, Burning on the waves, Then gone.²¹

“The Image is more than an idea,” wrote Pound. “It is a vortex or cluster of fused ideas and is endowed with energy. If it does not fulfill these specifications, it is not what I mean by an Image.”²² Gottlieb began to emerge, at this point, as *the* painter of such condensed, resonating, “luminous” images par excellence; his later Bursts can be considered the quintessence of Imagism in the visual arts. Perhaps he stated his position most succinctly in 1947, when he wrote the following:

The role of the artist, of course, has always been that of image-maker. Different times require different images. Today, when our aspirations have been reduced to a desperate attempt to escape from evil, and times are out of joint, our obsessive, subterranean and pictographic images are the expression of the neurosis which is our reality. To my mind certain so-called abstraction is not abstraction at all. On the contrary, it is the realism of our time.²³

The breakthrough came early in 1940 when, as Gottlieb told David Sylvester, "Rothko and I temporarily came to an agreement on the question of subject matter."

We embarked on a series of paintings that attempted to use mythological subject matter, preferably from Greek mythology ... at that time a great many writers, more than painters, were absorbed in the idea of myth in relation to art ... it seemed that if one wanted to get away from such things as the American scene or social realism and perhaps Cubism, this offered a possibility of a way out, and the hope was that given a subject matter that was different, perhaps some new approach to painting, a technical approach might also develop ...²⁴

Myth offered "a concentrated image of the world, an emblem of appearance,"²⁵ as Nietzsche had phrased it. Rothko felt that myth "expresses to us something real and existing in ourselves," that he used myths

because they are the eternal symbols upon which we must fall back to express basic psychological ideas. They are the symbols of man's primitive fears and motivations, no matter in which land or what time, changing only in detail but never in substance ... Modern psychology finds them persisting still in our dreams, our vernacular, and our art, for all the changes in the outward conditions of life.²⁶

Gottlieb's pictorial Imagism corresponds to Pound's somewhat Bergsonian idea that tradition is potentially ever-present. "All ages are contemporaneous," Pound wrote, and his poetry has been seen as Greek, Latin, ancient English, and modern dialects folded, "ply over ply," to tell more than the ancient rituals it is narrating. "Make Strong old dreams lest this our world lose heart"—the words Pound used to end his first book of poetry, *a lume spento*, and begin his second, *Personae*—are an encapsulation of Gottlieb's Pictographs, where mythical-cultural layering is rendered graphically. Oedipus, Theseus, and the Minotaur are symbolically fragmented into abstract signs and placed inside the black bars of a rectilinear cage by a dreamlike process of free association. "I was putting images into the compartments of my paintings as if I were doing automatic writing," he told Gladys Kashdin.²⁷ Another time, Gottlieb described his process this way:

The children of my imagination occupy the various compartments of my painting, each independent and occupying its own space. At the same time they have the proper atmosphere in which to function together in harmony and as a unified group.²⁸

He, as Pound said Imagists do, "seeks out the luminous detail and presents it. He does not comment."²⁹

The 1940s were a violent time, and, as Robert Motherwell says, "we are a very violent race ... so any American movement which established a very strong identity would have this quality."³⁰ Gottlieb (like Rothko) was basing his paintings on violent myths and Greek tragedies, and he felt such content was demanded by the times. And, as Gottlieb wrote in the now-famous letter he and Rothko addressed to *New York Times* critic Edward Alden Jewell:

It is an easy matter to explain to the befuddled [Jewell] that "The Rape of Persephone" is a poetic expression of the essence of the myth; the presentation of the concept of seed and its earth with all its brutal implications; the impact of elemental truth. Would you have us present this abstract concept, with all its complicated feelings, by means of a boy and girl lightly tripping?³¹

According to the philosopher Ernst Cassirer, whom Gottlieb probably read, "Myth cannot be described as bare emotion, because it is the *expression* of emotion. The expression of a feeling is not the feeling itself—it is emotion turned into image."³² Gottlieb saw it the same way: "Painting is the making of images. If the painter's conception is realized in the form of an image, we are confronted with a new natural object which has its own life, its own beauty and its own wisdom."³³

This fusion of idea, process, and image can perhaps be most readily seen in Gottlieb's prints. A circa 1939 etching (cat. no. 20) and a circa 1944 lino cut (fig. 7), which take two very different approaches to the same idea, make this clear. Both feature a large, space-filling amorphous shape containing two reserved areas where the ground shows through, resulting in a mask-like image. In each the biomorphic mass is held within a linear cage, but the nature of that linear structure is determined by the medium—the etched line seeming like taut wires, and the cruder lino cuts like thick bars. Gottlieb says:

When I make a print it is in the same spirit as when I make a painting. The process of duplication interests me only slightly. Mainly I am very much taken by an idea and very much enjoy developing it on the plate. When the time comes for pulling a proof, everything is terribly exciting. When I reach the point where I feel a proof is somewhat successful, I then am interested in the possibility of variations in individual prints. The search for variations, however, is really the search for the best proof of the original idea, and when I find it, there is the evidence—the proof.³⁴

Gottlieb stopped making drawings and preparatory sketches for paintings in the forties, his prints, in a sense, taking their place. The prints, like the paintings, could be arrived at intuitively, by a process of free association where imagery could be both layered and compartmentalized. The same images recur: arrows, faces, eyes, noses, hands, spirals, circles, triangles, and "X"s. The same intention lies behind them; they are to be grasped as a whole concept rather than as a narrative, taking a clue to the meaning from the title—*Omen* (fig. 8) or *Voyage* (fig. 9) or *Augury* (cat. no. 31). They are not meant to be read one unit at a time like a cartoon or like a Medieval polyptych altarpiece, even though the latter was one of the most important sources for their compartmentalized structure. In order to work against such a reading, Gottlieb often ran lines from an image in one compartment out into an adjacent image, where they signify something altogether different, and he layered images over one another. *Omen*, a large etching from circa 1946 with its watery overlays reminds one of peering through clear, shallow water at the sea bottom. (It was around this time, incidentally, that Gottlieb began to spend his summers in Provincetown, Massachusetts, painting during low tide, sailing at high. At the end of the fifties, he and his wife bought a house in the Hamptons on Long Island which enabled him to get even more sailing time in every year since he was closer to New York City.)

The collage-like manner of the Pictographs' construction is modernist in precisely the same manner as that of the poetry of Pound and Eliot. As Christine Froula sees it, "Pound has no story—no single story could be adequate to the modern world. Rather, the poem is a collage of fragments, of which Odysseus' descent to the underworld is the first, and it is style, language itself, which becomes the poem's story and history."³⁵ Eliot's manner of composing in fragments (many of which are oft-repeated symbols) has also been traced to Cubist poetry. Kenneth Rexroth observed that

the subject is vague, ill-defined, grandiose, and appears as an after image of the collage of a wide variety of fragmentary subjects. The *The Waste Land*, like the *Cantos*, is full of bits of narrative and description and little dramas and elegies. Within itself each fragment is intact and is usually taken from someone else's writing... The collages of whole sentences and paragraphs of *The Waste Land* and the *Cantos* go to form new significances.³⁶

According to Rexroth, "T. S. Eliot's objective correlative—'a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which present like a miniature drama the emotions, ideas, the judgements of a poet without comment'—become in William Carlos Williams 'no ideas but in things.'"³⁷

The way the images in Gottlieb's Pictographs interconnect with one another, sliding from head into torso, from arc into arm, or flip-flopping from half-nose and eye into half-head and shoulder, as happens with graphic clarity in *Hieroglyph*, ca. 1944 (fig. 10), is not unlike what happens in primitive art, such as Northwest Coast Indian and Oceanic art. The body's bilateral symmetry is used and abused to simultaneously establish and deconstruct an image—the face being the most utilitarian thing in the world for such purposes. Gottlieb frequently employs a meandering line that snakes back and forth to create pulsating alternations of positive and negative forms, and a heart-arrow image that has a similar effect. The arrow can curve to form a cheekbone or a nose; the heart can be a face, a nose, a bottom, male or female genitals, or, lopped off below the double arcs, it can turn into a tablet or seem like the top of a torso x-rayed. (Gorky, incidentally, used the heart for an equally wide and pregnant range of associations.) One final favorite Gottlieb image is that of a fish. All these phonemes in his formal vocabulary can be found in that page of doodles he did back in 1938 (fig. 6), and they can be seen to slide into the Pictographs through a golden etching of circa 1940 (cat. no. 21). By the end of the forties, in a masterly gouache on colored paper entitled *Black Arrow*, 1948 (fig. 11), they are assembled into a poem-painting that resonates with much of the world's art, past and present, Oceanic, Parisian, Italian, and American.

Other gouaches in the exhibition from the pivotal years of 1946-1952 are equally rich in associations and in paint handling. They parallel the paintings of this period in which Gottlieb expanded his color and his technical range enormously, just as he had hoped the new imagery of the Pictographs would enable him to do. Layering is literal, not only literary, and the skill he had achieved in handling a variety of media becomes readily apparent at this time. His color brightens and clarifies in the next decade, especially after working on a twelve-hundred square-foot wall of stained glass for the Milton Steinberg House on Manhattan's upper east side (fig. 23), but is rarely richer or more varied than in these years. In the next decade, after a second crisis period of searching for new images, comparable to that of 1939-41, new techniques of acrylic paint handling evolved that were in tune with the times and sustained him through the sixties and into the seventies.

Gottlieb was in a tough position in the early fifties. He turned fifty himself in 1953, and he'd made his first breakthrough into a signature image (the Pictographs) so early that they were being criticized as old hat by the time the rest of his generation made their breakthroughs—1947-50. At one of the Studio 35 roundtable sessions held then he condensed the situation with his customary hard-nosed accuracy into two problems—existing as men and growth in the work. "Different times require different images," he had said in 1947, and he was beginning his search for them then in two very different ways which would later coalesce into a single powerful image. Two works on paper of 1955-56—*Miss Brooklyn* (fig. 28) and *Waves* (cat. no. 48)—demonstrate the two images he began to explore in the late forties. One is an amalgam of a sort of figure (*Ancestral Image*, 1950, was the precursor for *Miss Brooklyn* along this line) and a sort of still life

on a table. The Unstill Lives of the fifties were born from this union. The other image is a horizontally divided picture field (a small canvas of 1947 is the precursor for *Waves*). When this kind of painting, which came to be termed the Imaginary Landscape, was married to the Unstill Life and oriented vertically, the Bursts were born. Thus at this critical turning point in his career the seeds were planted out of which the other three of his signature images would grow.

"The most extreme thing I could think of doing at that time was to divide the canvas in half," he said.³⁸ Perhaps it was also a result of spending so much time on the sea aware only of his boat and the horizon—the sea beneath him in all its active complexity and the sky above him with its luminous isolated sun and clouds. Imaginary Landscapes like the painting *Frozen Sounds, Number 1*, 1951, don't seem any more earthbound than images like *Waves* or *Sea and Tide* (fig. 26), which have to be considered "imaginary seascapes." As he said, "My intention was to divide the canvas roughly into two areas and in the lower part I would have some active, linear winds or shapes working ... and then in the upper part I would have roughly round or oval shapes which were completely separate and floating. In a sense they stemmed from the Pictographs in that the painting was still compartmentalized."³⁹ Other sources may have included his late twenties paintings of lonely figures "standing on the beach with a very heavy, metallic kind of sea."⁴⁰ Two-color, horizontally divided little enamel paintings by John Graham in his 1929 "Minimalism" exhibition at the Dudensing Gallery might also have been recalled at this time as well as a wonderful little 1919 painting by Milton Avery entitled *Moon Over the Marsh*, which Gottlieb undoubtedly saw in Avery's house. It should also be remembered that his friend Rothko was forming his signature image of vertically stacked horizontal rectangles around this time, and his other friend Barnett Newman, though usually orienting his "zips" vertically, occasionally, as in *Horizon Light*, 1949, tried working the other way. Then too, there is the constant presence of Joan Miro hovering in the background, not only because of paintings like *Person Throwing a Stone at a Bird* at The Museum of Modern Art, but also because he was actually an acquaintance of Gottlieb's. Gottlieb, in fact, often visited Miro in his studio while he was working on a mural commission in this country in the late forties. (Gottlieb's late works like the beautiful green and brown monotype of 1973 (fig. 52) makes this debt obvious, but, interestingly, at a time when Miro had possibly been influenced in turn by Gottlieb's work.)

Four acrylics on paper of the late sixties (cat. nos. 56, 57, 60 and 61), perhaps in part because of their water-base medium, reinforce the sense that the sea is a more potent source of this imagery than the land. Three have restless activity at the bottom (which incidently includes many shapes, like the figure eight, which relate to those found in the knots, the rigging, and the hardware on sailing boats); the fourth is marked by horizontal bands, like a becalmed sea. Marvelously painted technically, these pictures sing with color. Gottlieb's characteristically warm palette of Indian reds, browns, and golden ochres here lightens to buoyant pinks, sunny yellows, and bright reds. The way he superimposes shape on shape on ground so that maximum spatial ambiguity is established and the way the edges of each shape are physically manipulated to interact optically with the surrounding hue are simply masterful. He handles his materials with the kind of supreme assurance that, in sailing, made him so admired by other owners of Lightnings in the Provincetown races. He can place a unit with pinpoint accuracy on just the right spot, swell a shape here, tauten it up there, just as if he were trimming a sail to eliminate the slight sag or wrinkle that would cost the winning yard or two in a race.

Gottlieb developed the last of his signature images—the Burst—in 1957 by distilling it from previous imagery. His early traditional still lifes often had a top-heavy quality; the large roundish tabletop, laden with objects, was customarily placed above center. Legs and supporting arms

for the table seemed to be alive. Thus it was quite natural that figure and table could fuse in the Unstill Life during the early fifties. Horizontal Unstill Lives were elaborated into Labyrinths, which in one case reached the unusually large size of 7 x 16 feet, but vertical ones were simplified—essentialized—into two-part images, roundish, closed forms above, thrusting, calligraphic forms below. The verticality of the Bursts, with their humanoid implications, separates them from the Imaginary Landscapes with which they otherwise have much in common. Because of the automatic identification of the roundish forms at the top of the Imaginary Landscapes with celestial bodies or clouds, and the horizon line with the visual limit of land or sea, one carries that identification over to the Bursts without needing the horizon line. The jumble of lines and squiggling pigment below seem to have given birth to the floating blob above, like a pod to a seed, an exploding rocket-launch to Sputnik, or, more poetically, the chaos of pre-creation to the planets. We see it both as ordered object formed out of disorder and as release out of constriction. Having endured long imprisonment in the cage of the Pictographic grid, the artist's imagery is flung free in the picture space. Donald Kuspit suggests in a footnote to his article "Symbolic Pregnancy in Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still" that the shapes in Rothko's 1950 paintings may be "disguised reminiscences of the famous mushroom shape of the atomic cloud," an idea which he carries over into the notion of "libidinous discharge."⁴¹ An extension to Gottlieb's image world is not far-fetched and could be supported by either a Jungian or a Freudian interpretation of the themes of the Pictographs—Oedipus, Persephone, the Greek myths and tragedies. Some of the new images of 1957 were titled "Blasts" instead, which has more mechanical and explosive connotations than the organic physicality of "Burst." According to the artist, "the Bursts express a feeling of release and freedom and a kind of sense of expansion."⁴²

Oscillating as it does between figural and landscape implications, Gottlieb's Burst image is a blood brother to Rothko's stacked-rectangle and Newman's vertical-band signature images. All have iconic force because of their upright posture, their holistic compression, and their drastic simplification. All are condensed, resonant, luminous, and powerful. All are open to multiple interpretation—like poetry. Not reducible to a simple idea, they are thought complexes of great profundity. Because, however, Gottlieb was simultaneously involved with other signature images (the Imaginary Landscape and the Unstill Life) during the last decades of his life, he was not trapped, as Rothko and Newman sometimes seemed to be, in a single mode. He was even experimenting in some of the very late monoprints with a return, of sorts, to the Pictograph, revitalizing it by using the rectilinear structure as the image itself. But it is Gottlieb's color, at its peak of brilliance in the late work—whether on canvas (where an early fifties adjustment to working flat with quick-drying pigment brought about the final revolution in his painting technique), in acrylic on stretched paper, or in serigraphs—that is ultimately the crucial factor. Color enabled him to "explore a simple thing profoundly," as he told Martin Friedman was his central aim. Like Matisse, Gottlieb believed that great colorists needed only a few colors, great draftsmen only a few shapes. He wanted his work to be succinct and to the point, like rounding a mark with the fewest tacks in the fastest time during a yacht race. In his mature images he achieved what he saw as the quintessence of abstract art—the reduction to a simple resonating object that embodies maximum complexity.

NOTES

1. Marcia Epstein Allentuck, "Introduction," *John Graham's System and Dialectics of Art* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), p. 12.
2. Mary Davis MacNaughton, "Adolph Gottlieb: His Life and Art," *Adolph Gottlieb Retrospective* (New York: The Arts Publisher in association with the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, 1981), p. 12.
3. I am indebted to Sanford Hirsch, Curator of the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, for this and much other previously unpublished information.
4. MacNaughton, note 21, p. 26, and personal conversation with Leo Yamin.
5. Interview by Dorothy Seckler, October 25, 1967, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., p. 11.
6. T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land," *Collected Poems, 1909-1935* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1930), pp. 67-90.
7. Eliot, "The Waste Land," pp. 69-70.
8. Carlyle Burrows, "Art Before the Public at Home and Abroad," *The New York Herald Tribune*, May 17, 1930. Clipping on file at the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, New York.
9. Barbara Haskell, *Milton Avery* (New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art in association with Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 53, 56.
10. Diane Waldman, *Mark Rothko, 1903-1970—A Retrospective*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Harry N. Abrams and The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1978), p. 27.
11. MacNaughton, p. 16.
12. Gottlieb doesn't seem to have been particularly involved with Gorky, perhaps feeling he knew as much about French modernism, but there is a definite connection between Gottlieb's *The Family*, 1936, and Gorky's *Portrait of the Artist and His Mother*, 1926-1941.
13. Greta Berman, "Introduction," *Joseph Solman, Work of the Thirties* (New York: ACA and A. M. Adler Galleries, 1983).
14. Holger Cahill, *American Art Today* (New York: New York World's Fair, National Arts Society, 1939), p. 27.
15. Review of the Montross show of "The Ten" by Herbert Lawrence, *Art Digest*, December 1935, p. 12. Clipping on file at the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, New York.
16. William S. Rubin, *Art International* 3 (March 1959), pp. 3-4.
17. Gottlieb interview with Martin Friedman, August 1962, tape B, on file at the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, New York.
18. Seckler interview, p. 15.
19. Seckler interview, p. 21.
20. Herbert N. Schneidau, *Ezra Pound: The Image and the Real* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), p. 18.
21. Cecil Hemley, *Dimensions of Midnight, Poetry and Prose*, Elaine Gottlieb, editor (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1966), p. 5.
22. Ezra Pound, "As for Imagisme," *New Age* 16 (1915), p. 349, as quoted in Schneidau, p. 34.
23. Gottlieb, "The Ides of Art," *The Tiger's Eye* 1 (December 1947), p. 43.
24. David Sylvester, "Interview with Adolph Gottlieb," *Living Arts* 2 (1963), pp. 4-5.
25. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by Francis Golffing (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1956), p. 136.
26. Mark Rothko, *The Portrait and the Modern Artist*, WNYC radio, October 13, 1943.
27. Gottlieb interviewed by Gladys Shafran Kashdin, *Abstract Expressionism: An Analysis of the Movement Based Primarily on Interviews with Seven Participating Artists*, Doctoral Dissertation, Florida State University, 1965, p. 33.
28. Gottlieb, "My Painting," *Arts and Architecture* 68 (September 1951), p. 21.
29. Pound, *New Age* 10 (1911), pp. 130-131, as quoted in Schneidau, p. 117.
30. Robert Motherwell interview in Kashdin Dissertation, p. 75.
31. Edward Alden Jewell, "'Globalism' Pops into View," *New York Times*, June 13, 1943, p. 9.
32. Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), p. 43.
33. Gottlieb, "Letter to the Art Editor," *New York Times*, July 22, 1945, p. 2.
34. Gottlieb, "The Ides of Art," p. 52.
35. Christine Froula, *A Guide to Ezra Pound's Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1983), pp. 128-129.
36. Kenneth Rexroth, *American Poetry in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), p. 61.
37. Rexroth, p. 78.
38. Seckler interview, October 1967, p. 22.
39. Gottlieb interviewed by Andrew Hudson, May 1968; copy of typescript on file at the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, New York.
40. Seckler interview, p. 11.
41. Donald Kuspit, "Symbolic Pregnancy in Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still," *Arts* 52 (March 1978), p. 125.
42. Friedman interview.