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DE KOONING’S WOMAN PAINTINGS OF THE FORTIES AND FIFTIES

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ABSTRACT

Willem de Kooning, one of the cornerstones of abstract expressionism, began his career as a young artist by studying at the Rotterdam Academy of Fine Arts and Applied Sciences, whose curriculum emphasized detail and life drawing. De Kooning’s early work therefore parallels Realism and classical composition. However, after emigrating to America on July 18, 1926, De Kooning began an artistic progression that spanned over five decades. He explored concepts related to Realism, Cubism, and Surrealism, never constraining himself to one idea or movement, but instead tethering motifs together. He combined ideas and techniques from multiple styles and refused to settle into a single mode of expression. *Woman I* and De Kooning’s *Woman* paintings of the 1950s are examples of eclectic works that not only contain elements of various art movements, but more importantly represent a breakthrough for De Kooning. De Kooning’s *Woman* paintings are chaotic, unrefined portraits whose vibrant colors call to mind graffiti and vandalism. They are vulgar images that reflect a distinct difference among the past and avant-garde. This thesis seeks to explain what inspired De Kooning’s *Woman* paintings of the 1950s and why these works should be seen as a turning point in De Kooning’s career.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Painter C. Michael Dudash states that art can be seen as a large spectrum, with one end representing realism and the other end, abstraction. The extremes of the spectrum each offer something positive. Realism produces correct proportion and vivid detail, whereas abstraction offers experimentation and emotion. Willem de Kooning began his life as an artist working on the side of realism. His early works depict his subjects with clarity, and these compositions reflect his talent for drafting. However, throughout his life, De Kooning steadily moved from one end of abstraction to the other. His work progressed through numerous stages, growing more abstract with each decade that passed. This thesis explores an abrupt and alarming change in De Kooning’s style that occurred during the early fifties, which he expressed in his Woman series. This particular shift placed De Kooning at a point in the middle of the spectrum, giving these works some of the brilliance of each extreme. The uniqueness of De Kooning’s Woman series of the 1950s lies within their increased abstraction and their expression of vulgarity and emotion—qualities that are indebted to numerous influences, including modern artists and the context of life in New York City.

De Kooning’s early work reflects his four years of training from Rotterdam’s Academie van Beeldende Kunsten en Technische Wetenschappen (Academy of Fine Arts and Applied Sciences), which stressed traditional skills such as life drawing. The academy emphasized highly detailed forms of art “such as architecture and mechanical construction.”¹ De Kooning studied freehand drawing (Handteeken), focusing on still life during his fourth year.² Projects commonly involved trying to recreate classical works of art by closely studying their accurate

depiction of perspective and symmetry. De Kooning’s drawing professor, Johannes Gerardus Heyberg, promoted the idea of drawing “without ideas,”\(^3\) an approach based upon representing what one sees, not what one thinks.\(^4\) It usually took students months of meticulous effort to finish an individual drawing, and Heyberg’s teachings contributed to De Kooning’s highly rigid still lifes. De Kooning’s classical training is largely evident in his earlier work.

![Willem de Kooning Still Life (Bowl, Pitcher and Jug) 1921.](image)

The 1921 academic still life drawing *Still Life (Bowl, Pitcher and Jug)* is an example of a piece that clearly illustrates De Kooning’s classical training and early realistic style. Diane Waldman states, "*Still Life (Bowl, Pitcher and Jug)* reflects the young painter’s academic training in its traditional still-life arrangement and solidly rendered forms."\(^5\) In this particular piece, De Kooning depicted the objects with careful accuracy using conté crayon on paper. He

\(^3\) Elderfield et al., *De Kooning*, 61.
\(^4\) Elderfield et al., *De Kooning*, 61.
produced a balanced and proportional composition that follows all of the rules. De Kooning described *Still Life (Bowl, Pitcher and Jug)* by stating, “It’s like a photograph, except more romantic.” Upon arrival in New York in 1926, De Kooning continued to paint still lifes during his leisure time.

In 1935 De Kooning joined the WPA and worked with modernists, including his close friend Arshile Gorky, on designing an abstract mural for Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Unlike De Kooning’s prior still lifes—in particular, *Still Life (Bowl, Pitcher and Jug)*—these mural designs were more conceptual and did not directly illustrate objects, but rather depicted different shapes in various sizes and colors. De Kooning’s 1936 piece, *Study for the Williamsburg Project*, reflects De Kooning’s interest in the work of Picasso, for it closely resembles Picasso’s *The Studio* (1927-28) and *Painter and Model* (1928). De Kooning had seen *The Studio* at the

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6 Elderfield et al., *De Kooning*, 61.
7 Elderfield et al., *De Kooning*, 62.
Valentine Gallery in 1933, and he had viewed both paintings at The Museum of Modern Art in 1935 and 1936.\footnote{Elderfield et al., \textit{De Kooning}, 70.}

![Figure 1-3 Pablo Picasso \textit{The Studio} 1927-28.](image)

Toward the end of the 1930s, De Kooning’s style shifted.\footnote{Elderfield et al., \textit{De Kooning}, 79.} Instead of painting modern pieces that filled the surface with abstract, colorful shapes reminiscent of works by Picasso, as well as Piet Mondrian and Joan Miró,\footnote{Elderfield et al., \textit{De Kooning}, 70.} De Kooning returned to the figure. He painted images of men and then women. His women of the forties retained more of the clean, classical composition seen in \textit{Still Life (Bowl, Pitcher and Jug)}, as well as his other early still lifes. He would, however, eventually break through in the 1950s with \textit{Woman I}, a seminal piece that marks a dichotomy between the old and new.

In contrast to the largely classical rendering of \textit{Still Life (Bowl, Pitcher and Jug)}, De Kooning’s \textit{Woman I} signifies an audacious transition in his work. This aberrant painting seemingly captures a graceless woman with pale skin sitting near a body of water that could symbolize the harbor of Rotterdam. The vulgarity of this particular piece illustrates a remarkable
change in De Kooning’s style. De Kooning grew artistically throughout his career, and one specific artist or movement did not solely influence the shift he made with Woman I. Instead, a group of artists as well as a number of contributing factors shaped De Kooning over time, gradually influencing his techniques. Thomas Hess stated, “The evolution of De Kooning’s postwar style was... a continuous process—a gradual, logical, steady development, marked by hundreds of insights, but no blinding revelation.”¹¹ Hess stated that many factors influenced De Kooning gradually over time; however, he did not stress how strikingly dissimilar paintings, like Woman I, could represent a breakthrough. Therefore, in this regard, Hess may have shared a different point of view.

De Kooning was an eclectic artist, which makes it difficult to classify his paintings in absolute terms. In an interview about *De Kooning: An American Master*, writer Annalyn Swan stated, “One thing that permeates the book is how changeable De Kooning was. And he never settled into a style. He reinvented himself constantly. One of his favorite sayings was, ‘You have to change to stay the same.’ And he would grow bored working within whatever style he was of the moment. So he constantly reinvented himself throughout his entire life until the—up through the ‘80s.”¹² Like De Kooning, the Abstract Expressionists, in general, did not encompass a single, uniform approach to painting; rather they collectively believed that art did not have to tell a story to be effectual.¹³ Eventually numerous influences coalesced into the unique, wide-ranging style that De Kooning expressed in *Woman I*.

De Kooning’s marked creativity makes it difficult to determine which artists and works affected his approach to painting. Paul Cummings addresses this point with the following statement: “De Kooning would exercise his imagination, using selected elements of the pictures, combined with objects or situations seen in the street, and would synthesize them into pictures which often bore little relationship to their sources. In De Kooning’s work, therefore, the usual scholarly device of comparing a picture with one by a predecessor is less fruitful than the careful exploration of the artist’s thinking as evidenced in the development of his drawings and paintings.”¹⁴ Thus, in order to determine which artists inspired De Kooning to create portraits as bold and different as *Woman I* and his *Woman* series of the 1950s, many paintings must be closely analyzed for sections of the canvas that parallel De Kooning’s work. These paintings, like pieces of a giant puzzle, should fit together to help illustrate what inspired De Kooning’s

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paintings. There are numerous paintings by Picasso, Arshile Gorky, and Chaim Soutine that contain sections of canvas that parallel De Kooning’s *Woman I* and his *Woman* paintings of the 1950s. Furthermore, De Kooning emerged as an artist during a time when there was an influx of European Surrealist artists arriving in New York City. *Woman I* and De Kooning’s *Woman* paintings of the 1950s are tinged with elements of the city and traces of common Surrealist techniques. The cohesiveness between numerous De Kooning paintings and works by Picasso, Gorky, and Soutine as well as the aspects of De Kooning’s work that parallel Surrealist techniques suggest that contemporary artists and the Surrealist movement influenced the final compositions of De Kooning's *Woman I* and his *Woman* series of the 1950s.
Chapter 2

The Influence of Surrealism and Arshile Gorky

The advent of Surrealism in America during the forties affected De Kooning’s growth as an artist. In 1941, a number of conspicuous European Surrealist artists fled the war and arrived in New York. During this time, De Kooning was trying to find a new style that was more disconnected from his prior training at Rotterdam. The Surrealists helped De Kooning to move away from the rigid schooling he received at the academy. He never officially joined them, for he was not one to fully conform to an exclusive artistic movement; however, the Surrealists, in concert with numerous other factors, did significantly influence De Kooning, and throughout the forties, his painting style evolved. He soon became more unconventional and somewhat more impetuous, as he began to worry less about precision, allowing his eyes to drift while painting. In short, the Surrealists “encouraged De Kooning to open up.”

The brushwork De Kooning used in Woman I is more loose and unpredictable than that of his earlier paintings, such as his Woman paintings of the forties. For instance, Seated Woman of 1940 consists largely of clearly defined contour lines. It appears as though De Kooning painted the figure’s legs with one smooth, continuous stroke; the contours are boldly outlined in thick red paint. The legs of Woman I, however, appear chaotic and undefined. Furthermore, the figure’s body in Woman I is more fractured than the figure seen in Seated Woman. It is possible that the presence of the Surrealists in New York influenced the spontaneous and loosened brushwork of Woman I. Moreover, the Surrealists most likely helped to direct De Kooning toward the individual style he displayed in Woman I, for their ideas accented motifs that were, in many ways, impromptu.

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15 Waldman, Willem de Kooning, 47.
16 Stevens and Swan, De Kooning, 174.
Woman I, in some ways, illustrates how Surrealism affected De Kooning. For instance, De Kooning allowed the paint to drip profusely in certain areas of the canvas. In particular, on the bottom right of the composition, he let watery black paint fall like dark rain. The Surrealists promoted the use of inadvertent effects, such as dripped paint, which other painters of the New York School, namely Jackson Pollock, used as prominent motifs in their work.\(^\text{17}\) Thus, the presence of the “dark rain” in Woman I could symbolize an aspect of Surrealism and support the

idea that Surrealism, to a certain degree, influenced De Kooning and his final renderings of

*Woman I* and his *Woman* paintings of the 1950s.

Gorky is also partly responsible for the dripped paint in *Woman I*. The Surrealist painter Matta taught Gorky this technique, for he “urged him to be freer – to use any accidental drips to spark improvisations.”¹⁸ In his 1944 painting, *The Leaf of the Artichoke Is an Owl*, Gorky let paint drip in numerous areas of the canvas. In particular, at the bottom and the upper left of the canvas there is dripped black paint that resembles the “dark rain” in *Woman I*. Gorky had a profound influence on De Kooning. They were close friends, and De Kooning lauded Gorky’s work. Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan wrote, “Gorky was the only figure to whom he [De Kooning] willingly “gave in,” the only one who seemed indispensable to his evolution as an

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¹⁸ Stevens and Swan, *De Kooning*, 173.
artist. Gorky was the essential alchemist in De Kooning’s early life, the brother who possessed the secrets that lay beyond the academy doors.”\textsuperscript{19} For De Kooning there was, to some extent, a desire to exit the academy, not forgetting what it taught him, but moving forward into a new form of self. Gorky and the Surrealists, in many ways, helped De Kooning to find his own way out; they are most likely responsible for encouraging the dripped paint in \textit{Woman I}.

\textsuperscript{19} Stevens and Swan, \textit{De Kooning}, 101.
Chapter 3

Picasso and Cubism

De Kooning’s corporeal paintings of the forties parallel the work of Picasso, which could suggest that Picasso also played a part in De Kooning’s growth as a painter. The juxtaposition of numerous works by De Kooning and Picasso illustrates the evident connection between them and further demonstrates Picasso’s impact on De Kooning. This influence was especially pronounced during De Kooning’s artistic progression of the forties, which served as a foundation for Woman I.

De Kooning’s Untitled Study (Women) of 1948 resembles Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon. There are correlations between Picasso and De Kooning’s depictions of form, their
representation of eyes, and their color theory. The similarities between these two paintings suggest that Picasso influenced the work that De Kooning completed before Woman I, in particular his depictions of the female figure. Since these connections are also present in later works like Woman I, it is evident that Picasso, in some ways, shaped the final composition of Woman I.

Both Untitled Study (Women) and Les Demoiselles d’Avignon consist of five figures that reflect African sculpture. The representation of African tribal art is indebted to Picasso, who observed various forms of “primitive” art, including work from Africa, in the Trocadéro museum in Paris. Regarding the time he spent in the Trocadéro museum, Picasso himself stated, “I understood why I was a painter. All alone in that awful museum, with masks, dolls made by the redskins, dusty mannequins. Les Demoiselles d’Avignon must have come to me that very
The faces of Picasso’s figures are particularly reminiscent of the African sculpture that he viewed in the Trocadéro. Their ovate eyes and big noses appear as though they emanated from the wooden masks that he referred to in the above statement. In *Untitled Study (Women)*, De Kooning painted like Picasso; the faces of his figures also echo African sculpture, and their eyes have the same distinct contour that Picasso used. Further, in *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* and *Untitled Study (Women)*, Picasso and De Kooning both embellished the size of the figures’ eyes. These parallels may indicate that Picasso influenced De Kooning's 1940s drawings and paintings of women.

In *Woman I*, De Kooning again augmented the facial features of the figure, forming two eyes that overwhelm the viewer with their vast presence. Marla Prather stated that De Kooning gave *Woman I* “bug eyes.” De Kooning’s use of disproportion is analogous to the irregularity seen in *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*. The parity between the shape and the size of the eyes in *Woman I* and those of *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* could suggest that Picasso affected De Kooning’s painting style, influencing De Kooning’s rendering of *Woman I*.

In addition to the design of the figures’ face—in particular, the size and shape of their eyes—there exists a likeness in the overall compositions of the female bodies painted by De Kooning and Picasso. For example, in *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, Picasso depicted women with planar, geometric anatomy. He filled the space between each form with slants and slopes, producing an oblique background of angular drapery. De Kooning painted the figures in *Untitled Study (Women)* with an analogous representation of form, which explains why the two paintings display a similar aesthetic. De Kooning also painted the bodies of his women with jagged lines and crossing brushstrokes, which left them heavily severed, bent, and fractured in an abstract

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21 Marla Prather et al., *Willem de Kooning: Paintings* (National Gallery of Art, 1994), 129.
arrangement of razor-sharp contours. Picasso painted the head of the figure on the bottom right of *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* in a convoluted way. He positioned the figure with her back toward the observer; however, he did not paint the back of her head. He painted her face. If a live model were to assume this anomalous position, such a move would involve a full rotation of the neck. De Kooning painted with comparable eccentricity. He illustrated the head of the far right figure of *Untitled Study (Women)* as if it had been disconnected from the neck. The head and neck form a nearly perpendicular angle. By breaking their women into incongruous planes, both artists produced a coalescence of different (and jarring) perspectives. This effect produces multiple abstractions from a single point of view, and it illustrates the similarity between these two paintings.

In *Woman I*, De Kooning again perplexes the observer by illustrating an enigmatic figure whose body reads like a foreign language. This coincides with the complexity of the figures in *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*. Further, analogous to the angular shapes Picasso used in *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, De Kooning used many geometric forms to outline the figure in *Woman I*. For example, her thigh is essentially two rectangles, one orange and the other yellow. Furthermore, the lower right side of her body contains numerous nearly perpendicular angles. Her breasts resemble curved triangles. It is difficult to comprehend what exactly a few of the forms represent. For instance, her arms seem lost in strokes of white grandeur; her physique seems like one large illusion. This abstraction may, in part, stem from Picasso, as he too painted figures with elusive compositions.

Another parallel between *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* and *Untitled Study (Women)* deals with color theory, as De Kooning and Picasso used related palettes. Picasso painted spaces of the drapery with cerulean, and De Kooning tinged his background with nearly the same hue.
Furthermore, the flesh tones in each painting are also comparable. The harmony between the colors seen in *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* and *Untitled Study (Women)* adds to their comparability.

These similarities suggest that Picasso shaped De Kooning’s women of the forties. Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan write, “his [De Kooning’s] women of the forties still remained in thrall to Picasso.” Further, Joop Sanders, a member of the New York School, states, “Cézanne was very important, and much discussed, but not as much as Picasso, who was a monumental figure at that point. And those women, the sort of grids [that Picasso used], I think Bill’s women might have been influenced by them.” The connection between the two artists is prevalent in the juxtaposition of *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* and *Untitled Study (Women)*. The cohesiveness between these two paintings in particular supports the notion that Picasso’s work influenced De Kooning during the 1940s, his formative years as an artist.

De Kooning’s statements suggest that his *Woman* paintings should be seen as participating in the long tradition of the female in Western art. However, in some ways, De Kooning’s women also reflect the context of life in New York. In his *Woman* paintings of the 1950s, De Kooning captured a sense of the women he saw in magazine advertisements, movies, and on billboards. Out of magazines he cut the straight, white smiles of American women, and used them as a frame of reference for his figures’ toothy grins. Moreover, in addition to the many attractive women that surrounded De Kooning in New York, he witnessed women at the bargain center on Union Square. These women were different from his girlfriends or the celebrities and models. These females seemed greedier and more obscene, exhibiting qualities that did not

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22 Stevens and Swan, *De Kooning*, 311.
23 Stevens and Swan, *De Kooning*, 219.
typify the usual goddesses of the past. De Kooning’s women express the lewdness and modern culture of New York. With regards to *Woman I*, Sidney Geist wrote, “Her image exists in the vast area between something scratched on the wall of a cave and something scratched on the wall of a urinal.”

In contrast to his women of the forties, *Woman I* marks a distinct shift in De Kooning’s style. It symbolizes a prominent leap into the world of vulgarity that, according to historian T.J. Clark, sets Abstract Expressionism apart from other artistic movements. The impropriety of *Woman I* suggests that De Kooning was not concerned with making “beautiful” art. In fact, De Kooning was not alone in this respect. After 1940, the New York artists broke from Paris. Eventually, they “changed the basic hypothesis of art.” As Thomas Hess put it, “It can be described (in a simile) as a shift from aesthetics to ethics; the picture was no longer supposed to be Beautiful, but True—an accurate representation or equivalence of the artist’s interior sensation and experience. If this meant that a painting had to look vulgar, battered, and clumsy—so much the better.” In essence, the American artists were transforming art and, with it, art’s attachment to a notion of beauty. Barnett Newman explained the idea, describing art of the 1950’s in a 1962 interview, “People were painting a beautiful world, and at that time we realized that the world wasn’t beautiful. The question, the moral question, that each of us examined – De Kooning, Pollock, myself – was: what was there to beautify?” Thus, for the artists of the New York School, "beautiful" and "ugly" could be synonymous. The British painter John Constable, who may have influenced Chaim Soutine, said, "I never saw an ugly thing in my life; in fact,

25 Stevens and Swan, *De Kooning*, 338.
whatever may be the shape of an object, light and shade and perspective make it beautiful.” For De Kooning, it may have been more meaningful to paint the woman as he saw her, even if that meant risking decline. Further, De Kooning painted *Woman I* with brushstrokes that resemble an aggressive outpouring of feeling, which did not produce the typical, pleasing portrait. *Woman I* consequently lacks the standard refinement and culture of what came before. With this shift, De Kooning became inspired with a different sense of what the word beauty really meant.

Figure 3-9 Willem de Kooning *Excavation* 1950.

Pleasing the eyes of critics and dealers had become less important. Leo Castelli and Sidney Janis, two esteemed gallery owners during this era, did not think highly of *Woman I*. Castelli applauded De Kooning’s 1950 painting *Excavation* and the black-and-white abstractions

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he completed in the late 1940s. However, he thought *Woman I* was disappointing.\(^{33}\) Janis wished De Kooning would disregard *Woman I* altogether and further develop the style he crafted with *Excavation*. De Kooning also received criticism from the influential art critic, Clement Greenberg. Greenberg insisted that figurative painting had become trite. He stressed the importance of abstract work. To him, this was the path to innovation and creativity. Even artists in De Kooning’s circle, such as Rothko, Newman, and Reinhardt, regarded abstract art as sterling in comparison to other movements.\(^{34}\) Nevertheless, despite the unfavorable landscape, De Kooning continued his endeavor with daring persistence. This audacious move was a formative rite of passage that finally gave De Kooning the unique voice that he had been searching for since he started painting full-time in late 1935. De Kooning’s longing for an individual style stemmed from Gorky, who believed in “having your own ideas.”\(^{35}\) Jack Tworkov, an American abstract expressionist painter, explained this concept well. He stated, “This emphasis and reliance on yourself, on not looking over the shoulder of others, or painting as if others were looking over your shoulder, became the main theme. And because there was this break with tradition, there was a real kind of effort to break with Europe, to break with Picasso, to break with Cubism, to break with Surrealism, or whatever.”\(^{36}\) *Woman I* was De Kooning’s way of standing out. He did not let the art world suppress his vision. He instead set off in a new direction, tempering past ideas with modern abstraction to redefine his perception of the human figure.

De Kooning’s 1940 painting *Untitled* shares a striking likeness with Gorky’s 1934 painting *Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia*, which illustrates the similarity between these two

\(^{33}\) Stevens and Swan, *De Kooning*, 341.
\(^{34}\) Stevens and Swan, *De Kooning*, 309.
\(^{35}\) Stevens and Swan, *De Kooning*, 103.
\(^{36}\) Stevens and Swan, *De Kooning*, 219.
artists and the influence that Gorky had on De Kooning. De Kooning painted very similar
biomorphic forms in Untitled that coincide with shapes Gorky displayed in Nighttime, Enigma
and Nostalgia. Both paintings contain flat, circular shapes and rectangles, displayed in a very
similar pattern. The juxtaposition of De Kooning’s 1947 painting Valentine and Gorky’s 1943
painting Garden in Sochi further illustrates the connection between their work, because these two
paintings are comparable in design. Each piece contains an array of analogous biomorphic
patterns, organized in a perplexing arrangement of abstraction. The shapes in Valentine are more
disheveled and less defined than those in Garden in Sochi. Nonetheless, the two paintings
contain very similar shapes that cover the canvas in a connected fashion. There is also a
relationship to De Kooning’s Valentine and Gorky’s The Leaf of the Artichoke is an Owl, for the
color hues in these two paintings are nearly the same. They both contain a corresponding mixture
of pink, black, yellow, red, and white hues; the colors match with each other as though the artists
were working with coinciding palettes. These are clear examples of Gorky's presence in De
Kooning's work.

Gorky helped to prepare De Kooning for Woman I. De Kooning acknowledged Gorky’s
influence in a 1972 interview with critic Harold Rosenberg: “I was lucky when I came to this
country to meet the three smartest guys on the scene: [Arshile] Gorky, Stuart Davis and John
Graham. They knew I had my own eyes, but I wasn’t always looking in the right direction.”37
Further, Rosenberg stated that Gorky changed De Kooning’s “entire attitude toward painting.”38
Gorky taught De Kooning the importance of breaking new ground and that modern art did not
have to abnegate the past. These two fundamental ideas are embedded in Woman I. For instance,
the notion of painting a seductive female monster with sharp teeth was unprecedented. It

37 Sally Yard, Willem de Kooning: Works, writings and interviews (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafa, 2007), 141.
38 Stevens and Swan, De Kooning, 103.
parallels Gorky’s remark about “having your own ideas.” Further, De Kooning gave *Woman I* traces of Cubist structure, which shows that he was not dismissing the past. Picasso and Cubism were still alive to De Kooning. He was also holding onto Rubens. In an interview with Selden Rodman, De Kooning stated that he admired Rubens “for creating a great style and working in it with complete conviction and reckless abandon.” Gorky had a remarkable impact on De Kooning and he served as an influential figure that helped to construct the artist who would eventually paint *Woman I*. De Kooning stated, “When, about fifteen years ago, I walked into Arshile’s studio for the first time, the atmosphere was so beautiful that I got a little dizzy and when I came to, I was bright enough to take the hint immediately… I am glad that it is about impossible to get away from his powerful influence. As long as I keep it with myself I’ll be going all right.” Thus, by giving De Kooning a new outlook, Gorky guided De Kooning toward *Woman I*.

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39 Stevens and Swan, *De Kooning*, 103.
40 Stevens and Swan, *De Kooning*, 361.
Chapter 4

Chaim Soutine

It took more than Gorky’s ideas to make De Kooning leap into the world of vulgarity with such tenacity, and there is evidence to suggest that the French painter Chaim Soutine gave De Kooning a push he needed. De Kooning held Soutine in the highest regard. In 1977, he stated, “I’ve always been crazy about Soutine – all of his paintings.” He even cited Soutine as his favorite painter, stating "I think I would choose Soutine [as my favorite artist]…Maybe it's the lushness of the paint. He builds up a surface that looks like a material, like a substance. There's a kind of fleshiness in his work… I remember when I first saw the Soutines in the Barnes Collection… the Matisses had a light of their own, but the Soutines had a glow that came from within the paintings—it was another kind of light.” Clearly De Kooning admired Soutine, and the connections between their paintings suggest that Soutine influenced the style of De Kooning's *Woman* paintings of the 1950s.

Soutine was a French expressionist oil painter whose style of painting was very similar to the artistic direction De Kooning and the New York School artists explored during the early 1950s. H. H. Arnason has stated that Soutine "is closer than any artist of the early twentieth century to the abstract expressionists of the 1950s." Thus, Soutine was an important antecedent of the expressionist style De Kooning and the New York School painters showcased throughout the 1950s.

Having Jewish heritage affected Soutine's artwork in numerous ways. Growing up in an impoverished, Jewish *shtetl* familiarized Soutine with the true meaning of sadness and suffering,

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which he expressed in his paintings. The pain he displayed contrasts with the lighthearted paintings of folk artists. Indeed, like De Kooning, Soutine was different and he did not follow a particular trend or school. As an artist in Paris, Soutine found that being Jewish separated him from the majority, just as being Dutch, in some ways, isolated De Kooning. Maurice Sachs wrote of Soutine, "What his native ghetto poured into his blood will never be taken from him, namely, suffering; for to the suffering of poverty and illness must be added that racial suffering of which one is never rid." Soutine's supporters stated that his work was a "direct product of his Jewish angst." The Jewish critic Waldemar George said, "In each of his canvases he (Soutine) gives himself over entirely. His work looks to me like a hemorrhage. Before rendering his soul, the artist spits up all his blood. And each spurt gives birth to a new vision, singularly intense, tragic, and painful." The numerous adversities Soutine faced during his youth and young adulthood produced a "tragic tone" in his paintings. Avigdor Posèq states, "His (Soutine's) tragic mode may in fact bear the stamp of the poverty and hardships he experienced in his youth in the remote Jewish community in Lithuania and of his isolation in the alien Parisian milieu." Thus, the common theme of tragedy embedded in Soutine's paintings likely reflects the hardships of his early Jewish life. De Kooning faced comparable oppression due to his immigration and times of poverty. Artist Alain Brustlein once described De Kooning as “almost penniless.” Moreover, Walter Auerbach, an early collector of De Kooning’s work, compared his and his wife’s financial situation to De Kooning’s stating, “We had very little, but he [De Kooning] had even

50 Stevens and Swan, De Kooning, 177.
At times De Kooning too was an outsider, trying to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers, while at the same time he faced financial difficulties. Therefore, De Kooning and Soutine overcame analogous hardships. Being poor is not a prerequisite for painting darkness; many affluent artists do this. However, De Kooning identified with Soutine’s situation and with his painting style, which could be why their paintings seem to find beauty in somber subject matter.

Several critics and historians have asserted that Soutine's Jewish upbringing also affected his growth as an artist because the shtetl shaped his ability to express himself. Maurice Tuchman states, "In the shtetl, extremely high value was placed on emotional expressiveness and feeling. Students and former inhabitants of the shtetl constantly point to the texture of daily life as being full of energy and noise and agitation. Expressions of vitality in any form were regarded as healthy and desirable." Daily life in the shtetl was filled with activity and commotion. For example, families practiced a concept called shalom bayit, which literally means "peace at home" in Hebrew. They believed that God's presence dwelled in a home filled with love. Writers Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog describe shalom bayit as a "state of dynamic equilibrium" as opposed to "unruffled serenity." They state, "A happy household is a swirl of people, all busy, all talking. There may be arguments and nagging, mutual recriminations. All this is part of being expressive, part of showing one's affection and interest, part of sharing in the experiences of one's family…The equilibrium is possible because affection and anger are not in the least incompatible." The strong emotional environment of the shtetl influenced Soutine's expressive style of painting, particularly his dynamic brushwork. Abraham Heschel, a famous scholar,

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51 Stevens and Swan, De Kooning, 177.  
52 Maurice Tuchman, Chaim Soutine (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1968), 9.  
53 Tuchman, Soutine, 9.  
54 Tuchman, Soutine, 9-10.
wrote, "The vocabulary of the East European Jew's heart has only one sound: 'Oy!'" Soutine's paintings capture the combination of emotions embedded in this lament; sorrow, joy, and vivacity. In this regard, Soutine's paintings are representations of the cry of Eastern European Jews, which closely ties them to Jewish culture.

The subjects of Soutine and De Kooning's paintings are very similar. Soutine's work revolves around repeated motifs—the human figure, dead animals, a landscape or a still life. During the 1950s, De Kooning focused his attention on the human figure and urban landscapes. That Soutine and De Kooning chose analogous subjects for their paintings marks one of numerous parallels between the artists.

Soutine and De Kooning also opted for very similar modes of spatial organization. They placed the subject in the center of the canvas and chose not to fill the background with anything more than abstract arrays of different colors. This forced the viewer into confronting the image of the main subject, making the vulgarity of the dead animal or of the provocative woman unavoidable. Donald Kuspit stated with regard to Soutine's paintings:

One sees, in a Soutine picture, the same intimate thing, over and over again: an ordinary object—the human figure, but also, famously, a dead animal, its bowels sometimes exposed, or else a landscape or still life—precariously set in space. The object itself seems a precarious space—inwardly unstable, as its distorted appearance, latently grotesque, suggests. It holds its own, however unestablished it is in itself. We are claustrophobically close to it, and it threatens to impinge upon us, sometimes seems to erupt or thrust toward us, as though determined to impress its presence on

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us—to force us to engage its being with the depths of our being.

Whatever it is, it wants to make itself felt.\(^5^6\)

Soutine’s 1926 painting *Carcass of Beef* clearly demonstrates Kuspit’s point, for it gorily depicts an animal that is covered in blood. The focus of the painting is the meat itself, and Soutine painted a close-up view of the carcass. He did this to make the viewer gaze at the flesh directly.

De Kooning did this with his *Woman* series of the 1950s. His 1952-53 painting *Woman V* serves as a good example, for its composition reflects the same approach—zooming in on the subject to

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press the image onto the viewer. De Kooning made it difficult for a prudish viewer to avoid the woman's grin or large breasts, just as Soutine made it impossible not to see the bowels and the blood of the dead carcass. De Kooning stated, "Soutine distorted the pictures but not the people."\textsuperscript{57} He noticed how Soutine made the background largely anomalous, making the subject of the piece more apparent. Instead of hiding a painting's unrefined nature, Soutine and De Kooning made it a focus of many of their paintings. Soutine serves as a clear example of a

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\caption{Figure 4-11 Willem de Kooning \textit{Woman V} 1952-53.}
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\textsuperscript{57} Maurice Tuchman and Esti Dunow, \textit{The Impact of Chaim Soutine (1893-1943): De Kooning, Pollock, Dubuffet, Francis Bacon} (Cologne: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 14.
painter that preceded De Kooning and organized many of his canvases in a similar fashion to express unavoidable vulgarity.

The ways in which Soutine and De Kooning painted the subject of their paintings are also analogous, which highlight the similarity between their expressionist styles. They both used aggressive, slashing brushstrokes. They applied paint liberally, building up the surface of their canvases and forming areas of thick impasto. Soutine's expressionist brushwork, and De Kooning’s by inheritance, likely stemmed from Van Gogh, who showed the world how one could compose an image from deep, emotional feelings.⁵⁸

De Kooning knew of Soutine's work before he began painting his Woman series of the 1950s. He and the other New York School painters could have read an article published in the April 1937 issue of Magazine of Art, "Primitive Art and Picasso," by John Graham, which referenced Soutine. Furthermore, in October 1950, the Museum of Modern Art held a Soutine retrospective, which De Kooning and many of the New York School artists "took in with great admiration."⁵⁹ There were paintings by Soutine in numerous New York gallery exhibitions—Sullivan, Niveau, Valentine galleries—as well as in the Barnes Collection. For example, De Kooning stated, "I remember when I first saw the Soutines in the Barnes Collection."⁶⁰ The fact that De Kooning was familiar with Soutine's work supports the idea that Soutine influenced De Kooning's paintings, particularly with regard to the organization of each composition, the exploration of vulgar subject matter, the brushwork, and the thick application of paint.

De Kooning's Woman series from the 1950s contains elements of Soutine's work that illustrate the effect that Soutine had on De Kooning. Soutine's Woman in Red from 1923 was

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⁶⁰ Tuchman and Dunow, Impact, 53.
included in the 1950 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. Thus, this painting was available to De Kooning and painters of the New York School to observe. There are numerous similarities between Soutine's *Woman in Red* and De Kooning's *Woman V*. Neither painting flatters the model. Furthermore, each woman is sitting with her hands across her lap, grinning. De Kooning made his figure's grimace tooth-filled, differing to some extent from Soutine's example. The toothy smile more closely resembles the grin from Dubuffet's 1947 painting *Fauretir with Wrinkled Brow*. However, Soutine influenced Dubuffet as well. Thus, there still
exists a partial link between the teeth and Soutine. Nevertheless, in both paintings, the women have an asymmetrical countenance. The smile in De Kooning's *Woman* series may be an expression of his interest in Soutine's *Woman in Red*.

In many ways, De Kooning's *Woman V* parallels Soutine's 1923-24 painting *Woman Knitting*. De Kooning and Soutine approached their figures in much the same way. The woman in each painting is sitting with her back upright and her arms folded across the front of her body. Soutine painted another grin, thus showing that De Kooning and Soutine both reused this motif in different paintings of women. Like De Kooning's woman, Soutine painted the figure with wide-open eyes and a smile that lures the viewer. Further, Soutine and De Kooning both used a wide array of colors. For example, in both paintings, the woman's flesh is painted with a mixture
of green, white, red, yellow, and black hues. It is as if De Kooning and Soutine worked with comparable palettes. Both women have green painted on their face near their mouth. The two canvases are filled with a vivid display of many different colors, and De Kooning and Soutine arranged the composition in an analogous way. Thus, the juxtaposition of these two paintings of women illustrate strong similarities between Soutine and De Kooning that suggest Soutine influenced De Kooning’s *Woman* series of the 1950s.

De Kooning's *Woman V* also resembles Soutine's *Woman Wading*, which further suggests that Soutine influenced De Kooning's women paintings of the 1950s. Soutine's *Woman Wading* was not included in the 1950 retrospective at MoMA. However, there was a reproduction of it in Monroe Wheeler's catalogue for the exhibition that De Kooning likely saw.\(^{61}\) Since De Kooning's *Woman V* has been recognized as a depiction of a "wading bather,"\(^ {62}\) it has been compared to Rembrandt's *A Woman Bathing in a Stream*.\(^ {63}\) However, Soutine's *Woman Wading*, which is a response to Rembrandt's *A Woman Bathing in a Stream*, is more likely to have been the influential piece that shaped De Kooning's *Woman V*. *Woman Wading* has a strong likeness to *Woman V*. Judith Zilczer states, "The more frontal pose of *Woman V* corresponds closely to the stance of Soutine's *Woman Wading.*"\(^ {64}\) The two paintings have similar compositions. The women in each painting are sitting in essentially the same position, and they are illustrated from a coinciding perspective. Thus, it is likely that De Kooning was influenced by the overall composition of Soutine's *Woman Wading* and then applied a comparable layout to *Woman V*.

The thick, dense quality of De Kooning and Soutine's work illustrates a link between their styles that enhances the overall expressiveness of their paintings. Their analogous approach

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\(^{64}\) Zilczer, “De Kooning,” 48.
to paint application further indicates that Soutine influenced De Kooning. De Kooning and Soutine spent a lot of time perfecting their paintings, which gave their work an expressive quality. Soutine painted very slowly, often asking his models to remain motionless for two to three hours per session.\textsuperscript{65} He would spend an entire day working on a specific aspect of a painting, taking weeks to complete a portrait.\textsuperscript{66} Further, Soutine did not like to paint on new, clean canvases. Paulette Jourdain stated, "He couldn't stand to paint on blank, fresh canvas. We would buy old canvases and he would scrape them down and paint on them."\textsuperscript{67} Painting on used canvases gives the work more texture, because the new paint is being applied to old paint that has already dried. De Kooning also reworked his canvases by painting, scraping off, and then painting over the existing images. This reworking of a canvas causes the paint to build up, forming a teeming surface of different pigments. The areas of impasto, formed by the excessive application of paint, enhance the expressiveness of the work by capturing the "action" of painting. The viewer sees the depth and strength of each stroke. Since both De Kooning and Soutine reworked their canvases and struggled with their pieces for long periods of time, their works feature (or include) areas filled with copious amounts of paint. These uses of impasto reveal an important similarity between their expressionistic painting styles that supports the notion that Soutine influenced De Kooning.

Soutine's circa 1919 painting Landscape at Céret clearly exemplifies Soutine's use of thick, viscous paint. The abundance of paint gives the landscape a lush feel. The dense paint is apparent throughout the canvas, and in some areas it is more concentrated than others. De Kooning also used slow drying, rich paints. He mixed safflower oil, water, and benzine with

\textsuperscript{66} Kluver and Martin, “Chaim Soutine,” 104.
\textsuperscript{67} Kluver and Martin, “Chaim Soutine,” 104.
pigments, which gave them a "physical quality" that he referred to as "blubbery." He later switched from benzine to kerosene after learning that benzine fumes were hazardous. Nevertheless, he layered wet colors to build up physical surfaces. His friend Mary Abbott described the texture of his paintings with the words, "kind of like the top of a pudding." Soutine may have influenced De Kooning's use of dense, oily paint, as many of their works exhibit a similar application of this medium.

In conclusion, Soutine played a pivotal role in De Kooning’s artistic development. By painting dead animals and other dark subject matter, Soutine, in many ways, showed De Kooning how an artist could break conventions and redefine concepts. Soutine’s disturbing motifs may have pushed De Kooning toward augmenting the vulgarity of his work; it is this vulgarity that Clark states distinguishes abstract expressionism from other artistic movements.

68 Stevens and Swan, *De Kooning*, 466.
69 Stevens and Swan, *De Kooning*, 466.
70 Stevens and Swan, *De Kooning*, 467.
Moreover, Soutine may have influenced De Kooning’s style of painting to a significant extent, as evidenced by numerous parallels in their work. The similarities between many paintings by Soutine and De Kooning support the idea that Soutine served as an influential model for De Kooning’s *Woman I* and his *Woman* paintings of the 1950s.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

De Kooning remains one of the most important artists of the 20th century. He started painting as a twelve year old boy in 1916 and stopped in 1995 at the age of ninety. His active painting career spanned several decades, and he grew artistically throughout this time. His artwork began with rigid, accurate depictions of life—highly refined artwork that represented subject matter much like a camera. He gradually moved along art’s spectrum from the end of realism to the end of abstraction.

Many influences affected De Kooning, molding him through the decades into the artist that would unveil Woman I and his Woman paintings of the 1950s—avant-garde works that, in many ways, reinvented the age old tradition of the woman in art. Woman I and De Kooning’s Woman paintings of the 1950s combined the geometric patterns reminiscent of Picasso and Cubism with the very gestural abstraction that highlights Surrealism. Furthermore, they express lewdness and emotion and deploy effects that are deliberately vulgar. In his Woman paintings of the 1950s, De Kooning used techniques akin to the work of painter Chaim Soutine. De Kooning broke through gradually, and after this manifestation, he continued to evolve stylistically and paint pictures that have been seen as challenging. Through his constant exploration, experimentation, and longing for mastery, De Kooning had a lasting effect on the history of art.


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