

# ADDRESSING DE KOONING

One of the great beauties of the City is its palimpsest nature. That is to say, the way the stories and dreams of our predecessors propel themselves into the present - be it in material fact or a knowing in the heart.

The artist Willem de Kooning (1904-1997) constructed his paintings similarly - allowing previous incarnations, traces of discarded tangents and struggle to remain visible in his finished compositions. Much of his work's lingering power derives from this honoring of each painting's history - and, by extension, the history of the painter who painted it.

From December 1936 through December 1945 de Kooning maintained a studio at **156 W. 22nd Street**. It was while living at this location that he solidified his commitment to serious painting - though only a relatively small proportion of his production from this era is extant. His biographers, Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, explain:



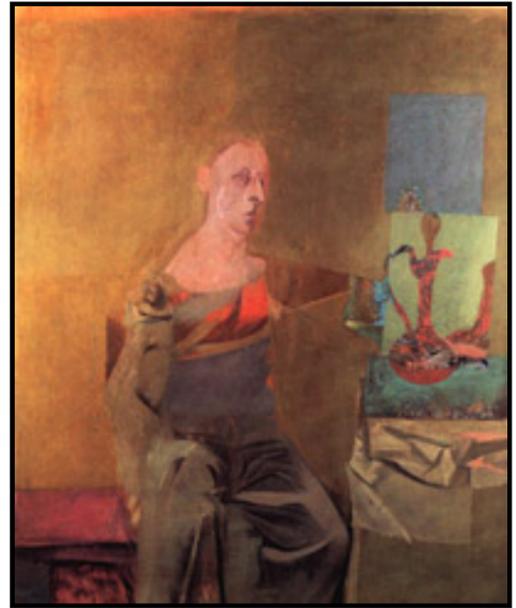
Portrait of Elaine, c. 1940-41

"De Kooning's struggles were heightened by his great ambition. If you were going to be a painter, Gorky always implied, you had to shoot for the stars. Or, as Denby observed, 'After awhile, one realized what it meant to him to be a painter. It didn't mean being one of the boys, making the scene or leading a movement; it meant meeting full force the professional standard set by the great Western painters old and new.' Destroying his own work became a way of not settling for second best. 'I destroyed almost all those paintings,' de Kooning later told Selden Rodman. 'I wish I hadn't. I was so modest then that I was vain. Some of them were good, a part of the real me. Just as Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters* [a great early painting of a family of peasants] is good, as good as anything he painted later in the *true* Van Gogh style.' The paintings that survived from the period did so mostly by chance: they were bought and removed from the studio before he destroyed them."<sup>1</sup>

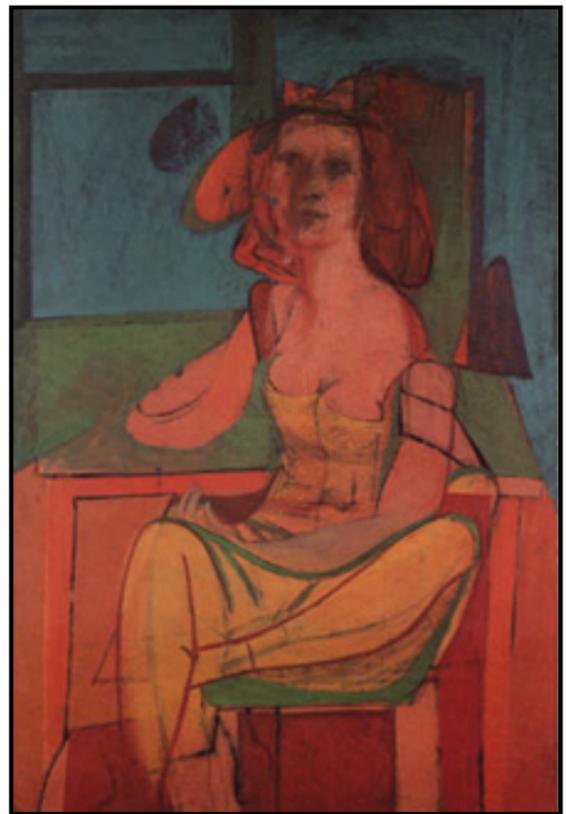
During this period, his work focussed on schematic still lifes and a protracted series of standing and seated men in interiors, frequently unfinished.

De Kooning met, fell in love with and married Elaine Fried while living at **156 W. 22nd Street**. Her arrival brought a new air to his art and initiated the first series of what was to become de Kooning's quintessential subject: Women. Stevens and Swan again:

"In 1939, de Kooning made a pen drawing of Elaine's beautiful hair. In the past, he had found hair particularly difficult to depict. (Many of his men appeared almost bald.) Now, he no longer shied away from the subject. His art began to lose its air of poverty. He relished the luxury of his lover's hair - its dense, dreamy fullness. How could he paint washed-out men, exiled in the gray Depression, when intoxicated by such fullness?"<sup>2</sup>



Glazier, c. 1940



Seated Woman, c. 1940



Pink Angels, c. 1945

De Kooning fully came into his own as a mature artist with the painting *Pink Angels* (circa 1945). Peter Schjeldahl writing in the *New Yorker*:

"De Kooning's career was at one with a wave of American temerity—overcoming old Europe in culture, as in war. I remember getting weepy with patriotic gratitude, at the Museum of Modern Art's de Kooning retrospective in 1969, when I encountered his first unmistakably great painting, *Pink Angels*: a congeries of crackling lines and radiant, fleshy masses, pressurized in a shallow pictorial space like that of Cubism, but molten and singing. Here was proof, like a flag on high, that what I couldn't help but be—American—was a stupendous stroke of luck. It meant living in the crux of history."<sup>3</sup>

Next  
Stop?  
Depends  
which  
way  
you're  
walking.

MAP: Addressing de Kooning



1. Stevens, Mark, and Annalyn Swan. *de Kooning: An American Master*. New York, Knopf, 2004, pg 141.  
2. *Ibid.*, pg 166.  
3. *New Yorker* issue of 2004-12-20 and 27