

ROBERT
MOTHERWELL
ELEGY

Robert Motherwell's Early Life and Activities

Robert Motherwell was born on January 24, 1915 in Aberdeen, Washington to Robert Burns Motherwell II, a deputy bank commissioner for the state in the area, and Margaret Lillian Hogan. His father later served as the president of Wells Fargo Bank and Union Trust Co. In 1932, Motherwell entered Stanford University, where he majored in philosophy, became engrossed in French symbolist literature, met Gertrude Stein, and associated with her brother Michael Stein as well. Motherwell wished to major in painting, which his father granted on condition that the former receive a doctoral degree from Harvard University. He therefore entered Harvard in 1937, where he met David W. Prall and under whom he studied both Baruch Spinoza's Ethics and aesthetics. The representative of the Teachers' Union at Harvard in this period, Prall deeply affected Motherwell especially in relation to political issues including citizenship, labor relations, and the Spanish Civil War. After briefly teaching at the University of Oregon, Motherwell once again faced pressure from his father and subsequently asked to study under Meyer Schapiro at Columbia University. Grasping Motherwell's yearning for painting, Schapiro introduced the former to a group of French surrealists.

The decade starting with 1940 was a transition period in which American modern art established itself as the mainstream of world art. In this era, as a painter, an author, a planner, and a critic, Motherwell participated in nearly all activities linked to modernism centering on New York City and made contributions as a key figure. He started to paint in earnest at the age of 24, in January 1939, and held his first solo exhibition at the Raymond Duncan Gallery in June of the same year. In 1941, he studied automatism under Roberto Matta, which would become the overarching principle of his subsequent painting. In addition, it was then that he came to read works by the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca for the first time. In November of the same year, he encountered figures including André Breton, Marguerite Peggy Guggenheim,

and Max Ernst and became an American editor of VVV, which was a surrealist magazine published in New York City. Motherwell was active as a key figure in modern art circles in the city from this period and onward and began to associate with figures such as Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, Jackson Pollock, and William Bazotes in 1942. In 1943, he held a group exhibition with Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, and Ad Reinhardt for the first time. In this period, the Art of This Century Gallery founded by Guggenheim actively planned and supported modern art exhibitions together with the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City and went on to host Motherwell's solo exhibition in 1944. Along with figures including George Wittenborn and Heinz Schultz, he initiated the "Documents of Modern Art" project, whereby writings by modern artists would be collected and published. Until its final issue (November 1951)—which included "The Dada Painters and Poets," a major essay by Motherwell—this series of publications played a decisive role in the development of modern art theory in the United States. By actively informing the public about contemporary modernism through countless documents, lectures, and educational, planning, and publishing activities, Motherwell was called the "spokesperson for abstract art." He established a school named "Subjects of the Artist" together with figures including Rothko and Barnett Newman in order to publicize abstract art. Indeed, Motherwell worked so energetically that it was difficult to find a field in which he was not involved in New York City at the time: he published *Possibilities* and *Documents of Modern Art*; penned introductions to and critical essays on exhibitions by countless major artists of the era; and taught at Hunter College. He also devoted himself considerably to the education of younger generations through lectures at Black Mountain College begun in 1945, teaching figures such as Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, and Joel Oppenheimer. On October 27, 1950 at the University of Louisville in Kentucky, Motherwell gave a lecture titled "The New York School." Here, he stressed that the uniqueness of both the New York School and modern art

lay in their prioritization of subjectivity, its sensibility, and a feel for abstract structures over descriptions of the external world and of dedication to the language of painting itself over the superiority of human vision. Mentioned for the first time by Motherwell, the “New York School” subsequently became a general term referring to the first generation of modern artists in the United States.

Despite such energetic work, Motherwell continued to experience a complete imbalance between his external activities as an artist and his private life: marriage to Maria Emilia Ferreira y Moyeros, whom he met in 1941, ended in 1948; and his second marriage to Betty Little, whom he met in the following year, led to an unhappy ending, leaving him solely with two daughters. The decade starting in 1948 was a period that Motherwell later confessed as having been the most wretched and painful period personally. He engaged in binge drinking and suicidal ideation and received psychiatric counseling, which would continue for a long time afterward. It was precisely in this period that *Elegy to the Spanish Republic*, his representative series, was initiated.

Elegy to the Spanish Republic

In 1948, Motherwell produced a drawing titled *The Sailor's Cemetery*, which was intended to recall the cemetery in Sète, France featured in a poem by Paul Valéry. Appearing for the first time here are human figure-like elliptical motifs and vertically positioned rectangles. Subsequently, he created an illustration for *A Bird for Every Bird* a work by a contemporary poet named Harold Rosenberg. Approximately the size of an A4 sheet of paper (27.3 cm x 21.6 cm), this drawing features for the first time the main motifs (three vertical rectangles and three ellipses depicted among them) and completed composition of the *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* series. Motherwell later titled this work *Elegy to the Spanish Republic No. 1*. Intriguingly, portrayed at the top right of this drawing are sharp forms reminiscent of wedges or daggers, which are not found in his other works. The artist later produced an oil painting under the title of *At Five in the Afternoon*, which precisely expanded the composition of this drawing.

Immediately after relocation from East Hampton, where Motherwell had established his home in the summer of 1948 and where his studio had been located, to West 14th Street in New York City, Maria, his first wife, left him. Consequently, he came to suffer from depression so severe as to consider suicide. Executed in this period, *At Five in the Afternoon* encompasses all major elements that would later appear in the *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* series. The phrase “At five in the afternoon” here is from Lorca’s poem *Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías*, which engrossed Motherwell at the time. A famous *matador* of his era and a great poet and dramatist at the same time, Mejías had lost his life at 5 PM on August 11, 1934 in a bullfighting arena from an accident. Lorca repeats “At five in the afternoon” (*A las cinco de la tarde*) 28 times in his poem, and the grief-stricken poet’s plaintive refrain apparently led Motherwell to use this as the title of his own work. A key theme of the poem, the stark contrast between life and death is represented in the artist’s work as a strong contrast between black and white. Set against bright sunshine, dark shadows and sharp boundaries recall the tragic scene of the bullfighting arena in Lorca’s poem. Through this work, Motherwell arrived at the realization that “that the image was now a temple.” He stated, “the temple should be consecrated to a Spanish sense of death, which I got most of from Lorca, but from other sources as well—my Mexican wife, bullfights, travel in Mexico, documentary photographs of the Mexican revolution, Goya, Santos, dark Hispanic interiors.” Executed in the same year, the *Granada* series was named after the city in which Lorca had been born and killed. Diverse interpretations of the forms repeatedly found in this series have been presented. For example, some critics have interpreted the works as reminiscent of sexual images or as recalling the parental violence experienced by Motherwell in his childhood and signifying castration anxiety. Others have interpreted the figures in these works as prisoners, recalling the *Spanish Prison* series, which is among the painter’s early works. Regarding these works, Motherwell himself adamantly answered, “There is nothing of the real world, and they only concern mental states.”

“The Spanish Republic” in the title was placed in parentheses for the first time at a solo exhibition held at the Samuel M. Kootz Gallery (1950). Earlier series used nouns

such as *Spanish Drum Roll*, *Seville*, *Malaga*, *Madrid*, and *Barcelona*, especially the names of cities, in their titles. At this exhibition, Motherwell explained, “The Spanish ‘Elegies’ are an attempt to compose a subjective image of modern Spain. They are all in black and white: celebrations of death, songs of mourning, elegies—barbaric and severe.” It was from *Elegy for the Spanish Republic No. XXX* (1954) that full titles were used and from *Elegy to the Spanish Republic No. XXXIV* (1957) that the word “to” was used in earnest in the titles. In this period in the United States, predominant was a climate critical of modernist artists due to the anti-communism of McCarthyism and improved relations between the dictator regime in Spain ruled by Francisco Franco and the American government. In a speech titled “UNESCO—Communism and Modern Art” delivered on July 20, 1956 in the US House of Representatives, Congressman George Dondero from Wisconsin attacked figures such as Motherwell, Pollock, and Baziotos, accusing them of scheming to destroy American morals in the name of “modern art” under the protection of Duchamp. In October of the same year, Motherwell’s mural *Mural Fragment*, installed at the University of Minnesota, was nearly removed due to demands from faculty members and students alike. As is apparent from the artist’s statement above, however, Motherwell cited the tragedy of the Spanish Republic because he wished to speak not of a particular political incident but of a tragedy faced by the human race in a universal sense.

As for *Elegy to the Spanish Republic*, Jack Flam has suggested an association with: Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*, on exhibition at the MoMA at the time; Henri Matisse’s *Bathers by a River*, showcased near the entrance of the Pierre Matisse Gallery then; Edouard Manet’s *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian*; and, finally, Francisco Goya’s *The Third of May 1808*. In particular, judging from a composition consisting of vertically positioned rectangles and elliptical expressions representing human heads, Matisse’s work does display considerable similarity to Motherwell’s work. Esteban Vicente, a painter from Spain, criticized Motherwell for making use of an unfamiliar Spanish tragedy in his works. In response, the artist stated that his paintings were “general metaphors of the contrast between life and death,” “beyond simply ‘Spain.’” This not only declares that the Spanish Republic, overthrown by a dictator, will continue to be remembered but also signifies that

such a tragedy is a symbol of universal pain instead of being limited to Spain.

The works showcased at Barakat Contemporary were created during 1958–85, or from the middle and late years of Motherwell’s life. 1958 is the year in which he married his third wife and fellow painter Helen Frankenthaler and traveled to France via Spain. This was the artist’s first trip to Spain despite his interest in the country and, at the same time, a very difficult journey because he was expelled by the Franco government for his *Elegy* series. He then immersed himself in the production of works related to the series in France, and the drawings showcased in this exhibition are from this period. In particular, 1965 saw Motherwell’s rediscovery of Japanese paper and initiation of *Lyric Suite*, which was an experiment with automatism. Produced in 1968, *Elegy to the Spanish Republic No. 110 C, E* went on to serve as a rough sketch for *Spanish Elegy with Orange No. 4*, which would be executed in 1971. This was the period in which construction on Motherwell’s studio Greenwich Village in New York City, where he would work until the end of his life, began and he became estranged from Frankenthaler as well. In 1972, the artist married Renate Ponsold, a German photographer 20 years his junior who would be his companion for the rest of his life. The largest out of the works exhibited, *Elegy to the Spanish Republic No. 130* was completed during 1974–75. In this period, Motherwell underwent serious health problems due to his kidneys in addition to the expansion of his studio in Greenwich Village. Enfeebled by a series of surgeries and considering his days to be numbered, the artist once again immersed himself in the *Elegy* series, to which No. 130 belongs. *Elegy to the Spanish Republic No. 163* is one of the works in the series that were executed in 1982 with pink as the base color. In this period, Motherwell allotted considerable time to printmaking including lithography and subsequently continued to experiment with diverse media including collages and drawings up to the latter half of the 1980s.

The *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* series encompasses 250 works that Motherwell executed throughout his life from 1948 and onward. These works were numbered starting with the fourteenth one (1953), and the series stopped at No. 173, the last work produced by the artist in 1990, one year

before his decease. Out of the 250 works in the series, 74 are completed and numbered works and 20 are numbered studies. In other words, many works in the *Elegy* series either lack serial numbers or are titled differently. This exhibition at Barakat Contemporary presents important works from the *Elegy* series numbered by the artist. The final work in the *Elegy* series is *Mourning Elegy*, executed in early 1991. Motherwell produced many series—e. g., *Je t'aime*, *Dance*, *Africa*, *Beside the Sea*, and *Open*—in his career. *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* is the only series that he worked on throughout his life. In October 1986, following Franco's death and Spain's democratization as a constitutional monarchy, Motherwell was awarded with a Gold Medal of Merit in the Fine Arts (*Medalla de Oro al mérito en las Bellas Artes*), the highest cultural recognition in the nation, by King Juan Carlos I as a token of appreciation. After revising his last will and testament at his lawyer's office on July 16, 1991, he returned to his home in Provincetown and passed away at 4 PM from a heart attack.