Introduction

In the welter of criticism that accompanied the ascendancy of modern American painting there is little to justify the legend of the New York School. Yet, whenever the New York School is mentioned, we know what we mean. The fact is that at a certain moment enough painters seemed to converge in a loose community, with sufficient aggressive energy to command attention both in the American press and abroad, to constitute an identifiable entity. Yet a refined study of the period roughly spanning a decade from the early nineteen-forties indicates none of the usual attributes of a 'school' of painting.

Long after the image of a New York School had been shattered by subsequent circumstances, Harold Rosenberg, one of the major critics of the golden moment, contended that the group he himself had identified under the umbrella of 'action painting' could under no circumstances be regarded as a school. In *The New Yorker* of December 6, 1969, he wrote that style in modern art is determined not by place but by ideology, and his examination of the 'great flawed art of Gorky, de Kooning, Pollock, Rothko, Gottlieb, David Smith, Still, Newman, Hofmann, Kline, Guston, and a dozen others' indicated that they were 'individuals bewildered, uncertain, and straining after direction and an intuition of themselves.' Unlike the artists of the School of Paris, who were bound by the aroma of their ancient city regardless of their intellectual divergence, the New York artists lacked 'the ephemeral influence that binds responses together beyond the antagonism of minds.'

The art historian and critic Robert Goldwater took up an entirely different position in his article 'Reflections on the New York School' in *Quadrum 8*, 1960. For him the New York School had an indisputable existence; it had 'lived a history, germinated a mythology and

produced a hagiology.' He notes the prevalence of paradox in the artists' statements, in which the idea of individual uniqueness was always stressed, despite what he calls the 'gregarious intimacy' of their association during the peak period. Goldwater prefers to speak of the 'multiple individuality' of the New York School, and suggests that the 'results' of their attitudes—their works—are more homogeneous than critics think. The implication in Goldwater's assessment is that ultimately, from the distanced view of the art historian, the New York School will be seen to share the ideological and stylistic characteristics that generally constitute a school of painting.

Throughout these discussions centering on the New York School, which is generally presented as an epoch in which abstract expressionism predominated, there is a constant conflict between individuality and the will to cohesion. The variety of personalities who expressed themselves vociferously during the period (those who talked in cafeterias as well as those who held forth at the Artists' Club), makes an orderly classification almost a falsification. It is also true that those who knew the artists participating in the School of Paris always made it a point of honor to stress their individual differences. But in Paris, even after the Second World War, if you wanted to know what the constructivists were thinking you knew which café to frequent, and if you wanted a taste of surrealism, you could find your way to the appropriate café in Clichy and sit right down in Breton's court. While there was little intercourse among the various groups within the School of Paris, there were always nuclei which made definition conceivable.

In New York, there were certainly circles of artists and their sympathizers that never touched, or that intermingled only rarely, but the stamp of an ideology was never precise. For example, Stuart Davis was for a long time a good friend of Arshile Gorky. In a memoir on Gorky, he related that when Gorky had had a few drinks he would try out his native songs and dances, but that in Davis' circle, only jazz was admired. Gorky found little encouragement there and went instead to the *other* circles he frequented 'where they liked that sort of thing.'

Many were attracted to New York and its artists precisely because of its chaotic impression of a vital activity generated by no specific ideology. The composer Morton Feldman, recalling in a conversation with the author the late nineteen-forties and early fifties, says he was attracted to the idea of an art scene where everybody was totally different from each other: 'There were both bohemians (or

loft rats) and Right Bank guys. I was aware I was involved in a movement of some kind which was not just the Club. Personalities didn't seem to change the fact that there was a movement going on.'

But it was the personalities that everyone, including Feldman himself, stressed. He took comfort in the fact that the painters seemed able to believe in infinite options, and remarked that 'the charismatic element was fantastically important.' He arrived on the scene soon after Gorky's suicide, and says that he heard nothing about Gorky's work—only about the man: 'Or, I heard all about Hofmann, or an anecdote about de Kooning or Pollock, but seldom about the work.'[1]

The vague 'movement' that Feldman sensed and others attempted to describe did in fact take on definition when art historians and critics gathered together the various hints in the works and statements of the charismatic artists, and reflected on their implications. The nearest thing to a definition turned out to be a summary of the philosophic preoccupations of the artists involved. Eventually, abstract expressionism and the New York School appeared to be a set of attitudes that generated works which reflected a set of attitudes. From the inside—from the point of view of the artists, that is—the movement appeared to be an extremely complicated set of prerogatives appropriated with a new-found zeal that could only be attributed to the peculiar circumstances of the post-war era. No single artist of this group voluntarily identified with the group, or accepted any of the sobriquets offered up by a succession of well-meaning critics. They did, however, accept the infusion of vigor that a communal activity sponsored, no matter how loose and ill-defined that activity was. Many of the artists were engaged in a surreptitious romance with the city itself, which became an almost mystical source of individuality. The 'loft rats' were proud of their penury, their bohemianism, and their absolute isolation from uptown city mores. Many of them took pride in their self-reliance, that old Emersonian ideal, and regarded survival as a sign of their artistic justification. The story that Willem de Kooning who, like everyone else, was starving during the early Depression years, refused a job decorating a department store and preferred to be evicted rather than sully his individuality and artistic integrity was often repeated. The streets of New York were de Kooning's 'place' (and the 'place' of all the others who felt the mounting heat of creative activity in the city to be a true inspiration). The dance critic Edwin Denby, de Kooning's close friend and most congenial memoirist, has told us how keenly

exhilarated the painter seemed to be by the atmosphere of the streets:

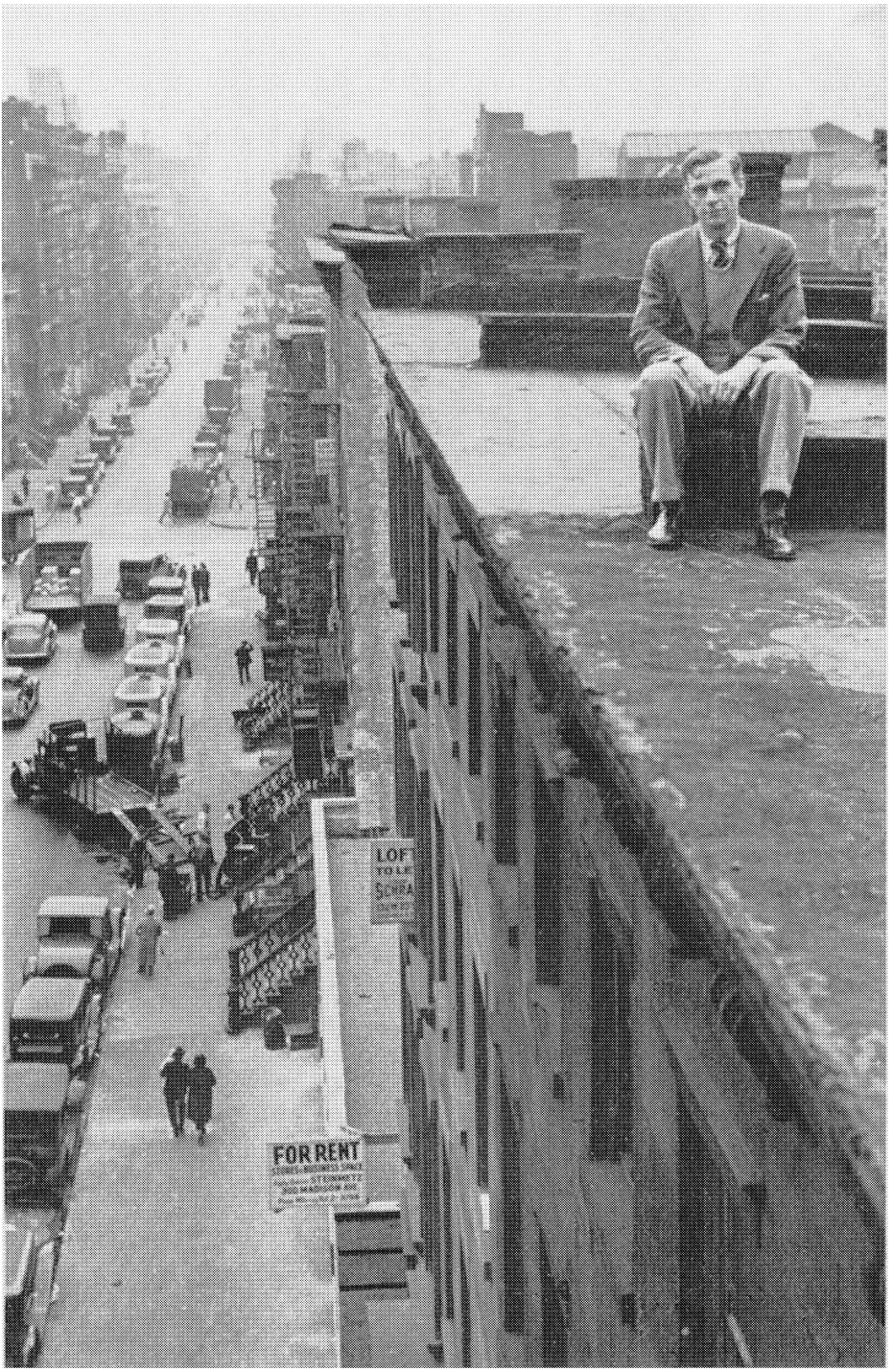
> I remember walking at night in Chelsea with Bill during the Depression, and his pointing out to me on the pavement the dispersed compositions—spots and cracks and bits of wrappers and reflections of neon light. . . . We were all happy to be in a city the beauty of which was unknown, uncosy, and not small scale.[2]

Aside from the sense of place, and the indefinable sense of movement (movement toward many things, it is true, but movement nonetheless), what seemed to draw artists together in the nineteen-forties was their common need to denounce all rhetoric and elude all the nets cast by ambitious cataloguers and historians. The feints and dodges of many abstract expressionists are well documented in the proceedings of the Club (see p. 198), and in numerous memoirs. The idea was to have no part of the dogmas that had nourished the modern tradition. Rhetoric, verbal or visual, was suspect; for where there is none, there is no school, and if there is no school, there are no limits. Their rhetoric was that of no rhetoric, and no one exemplifies this better than de Kooning, who has shifted his ground and contradicted himself publicly with the deliberate intention of throwing off the rhetoricians. As Denby says about de Kooning's attitude toward theory: 'He grasped the active part and threw away the rest.'[2]

Painters did talk, however, but with the kind of exploratory rhetoric that always left an opening, as the visual rhetoric of the abstract expressionists makes very obvious. Most of those who did meet and occasionally made impassioned speeches were careful not to be caught with an exclusive point of view. Nearly all the New York artists made it a point to announce their admiration for certain European artists, most of whom derived from sharply divergent traditions. Pollock said on various occasions that he admired Matisse and Miró and Mondrian; Guston at one point spoke passionately about both Mondrian and Soutine; de Kooning also praised Mondrian, as well as a host of very different artists ranging from Ingres to Cézanne; and Rothko admired both Miró and, on occasion, Léger.

Athough at certain times some of the New York School artists appeared to be forging an ideology, and although there were even

1. Edwin Denby met de Kooning when his kitten strayed into the studio, starting their long, close association. This photograph, taken by Rudolph Burckhardt, shows Denby on the roof of his 145 West 21st Street studio in 1936, overlooking just the kind of urban street scene that excited the trio of friends.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some assertions on formal and stylistic matters, all this amounted finally to a series of evasions. If, for a couple of years, Newman and Rothko and Still repeated similar notions, they never committed themselves to a group of practical working tenets: their statements were always quasi-philosophical and related more to what can only be called the *Zeitgeist* than to any concerted progress toward a movement. Most analyses of the nature of the abstract expressionist evolution correctly begin with the nineteen-thirties, when this generation—born between 1900 and 1922—would have been quite young and very susceptible to the tremendous external pressures that followed the First World War. The rapid acceleration of social and economic change after 1918 mitigated many traditional American views of the role of the visual arts. The values inherited by this generation were quickly rejected, but many of the problems handed down from the late nineteenth century remained in the background.

One of the most complicated of these problems inherited by our first generation of international artists was the relative indifference of American society to their existence. As the experience of the W.P.A.* was to demonstrate, there were vast geographical areas in the United States where no living painter or sculptor could be found, much less a museum. Although culture, as conceived by Americans, had penetrated the hinterland in the form of public libraries, literary societies, and even music-circles, the plastic arts had, for various reasons, lagged far behind. One reason for this was that the artist who happened to be born in a barren cultural milieu usually moved as soon as possible to a metropolis, preferably New York.

Even there, the experience of the painter or sculptor was tinged with a lack of confidence in the importance of the visual arts. More than a century of turmoil had failed to resolve some of the basic conflicts of the artist with his society. For Americans an artist had always been valued for his functional role—whether as historian of manners and morals, flatterer of social status, or glorifier of national aspiration—and very rarely for his imaginative spirituality. The history of American painters who digressed from the motifs established by their patrons is a record of repeated cries of loneliness and

*W.P.A. stands for Work Projects Administration, a government agency, established in 1935 by President Roosevelt (and redesignated in 1939 as Works Progress Administration), which undertook extensive building and improvement programs to provide work for the unemployed. The Federal Art Project and Federal Writers Project were two of its programs.

despair, a story of flinty, determinedly reclusive eccentricity. Very early in American history the painter learned to accommodate the very few patrons who needed his services. John Singleton Copley found himself in difficulties when the conflict between loyalists and revolutionaries developed in New England, and wrote to Benjamin West in 1770 that the artist should remain apolitical, since political struggles 'were neither pleasing to an artist or advantageous to the Arts itself.'[3] And in the middle of the following century Thomas Cole testified to the exigencies of patrons when, toward the end of his life, he sadly wrote 'I am not the painter I should have been had there been a higher taste.'[4] While there was always a very small group of enlightened patrons in the United States, their enlightenment did not extend so far as to honor the imagination of the painter above all else. Walt Whitman's defense of Eakins' portraiture came in response to the unseemly demands of the so-called enlightened patrons. Until World War II, most wealthy patrons regarded the painter and sculptor as embellishments of culture, basically non-essential.

Since America had long since decided that the artisan and craftsman should keep his place, many artists had unconsciously accepted the condition for their survival and stressed the craftsman's neutral position. Others struggled to establish a professionalism on the European model, but few artists could really believe in their professional status. Each successive revolt, every attempt to create a national standard of professionalism, seemed to founder on the problem of patronage. The very first art academy in New York disintegrated when its founders—the wealthy patrons and *their* artists—demanded obeisance. The choice was almost always to be a dutiful artisan, a polite courtier, or a pariah. The frustration of America's serious artists can be attributed partly to the fundamental anti-intellectualism of the puritan culture on the one hand, and partly to the Brahmin suspicion of the handworker on the other. Although there have been many recent evaluations of puritanism, some of which have discounted its anti-intellectual bias and its utilitarian prejudices, there can be no doubt that America was strongly affected by the puritan suspicion both of the sensuous side of existence and of the heresies of imaginative intellectual life. Artists themselves very often reflected these tendencies, rejecting theory as frivolous and esthetic discourse as somehow deleterious to their pioneer sensibilities. The abstract expressionists often boasted of their working-class origins, and some of their number sought opportunities

to prove themselves in the world of physical work—the kind of 'real' work they associated with the wood-chopping, sweating, pioneer spirit.

Although literary men were themselves none too stable in American culture, they all too often shared the puritanical suspicion of the sensualist, and associated the artist or the manual worker with a lower order of civilization. The kind of camaraderie that now and then developed among European poets and writers and the adventurous artists of their generation was almost unknown in American circles after the Civil War. If the American painter felt isolated, as he repeatedly said he did from the very beginning, he was isolated not only from the public at large, but also from that segment of the public known as the intelligentsia—a condition peculiar to the United States. A cursory glance at the weeklies and periodicals read by the intellectuals from the Civil War onward into the nineteen-thirties proves how little the visual arts were considered vital to our civilization. When the *Dial* or *Vanity Fair* wished to show how cosmopolitan they were, they nearly always published the work of Europeans, or else took the advice of Europeans in their choice of material. At the height of its intellectual prowess during the years 1943–45, *The New Republic* published only two articles dealing with painting and sculpture, and both of those referred more to the sociological ambience than to specific plastic problems.

The caution with which the literati approached the artist, whose 'loft-rat' bohemianism was markedly different from the Greenwich Village literary bohemianism, can be traced in many forms. A highly sensitive poet, Randall Jarrell, never could overcome his secret distrust of the painter and an overwhelming desire to cry fraud whenever he encountered the language of the plastic artist in its most opaque abstraction. In one of his last works, a book of essays,[5] he examined 'The Taste of the Age' with considerable distaste, but lapsed into downright philistinism himself when he came to speak of the visual arts: 'Our society, it turns out, can use modern art,' he wrote, sneering at the restaurant that orders a mural by Miró, and conjuring up a president of a paint factory who goes home to contemplate two paintings by Jackson Pollock: 'He feels at home with them; in fact, as he looks at them he not only feels at home, he feels as if he were back at the paint factory.' Such lack of comprehension drove the poets themselves to Europe between 1900 and 1930, where they found personal fulfilment merely by rubbing shoulders with other poets, and sending back occasional poems to be published in the

struggling little magazines of America. The painters and sculptors who felt compelled to leave philistine America behind were doubly cursed, having been largely ignored both by the literati (with a few honorable exceptions grouped around Edward Stieglitz's magazine *Camera Work*) and by the public in general. Moreover, they found little response to their efforts to show their work. There was nothing for them comparable to the little magazine for poets, and the few inspired protagonists, such as Stieglitz, made little headway. When Adelyn Breeskin wrote a restrained foreword in 1965 for an exhibition detailing the early efforts of an American vanguard, *The Roots of Abstract Art in America, 1910–1930*, she noted that until 1920 the lack of encouragement did not seem to dampen the spirits of the early experimentalist. But,

> in the story of John Covert, we find an example of the discouragement which many of the group then experienced. By 1923, due to lack of support, he had given up art altogether and gone into business. For others, discouragement brought a more tragic result. Alfred Maurer, Oscar Bluemner, and Morton Schamberg all were suicides. The cause, at least in part, was the frustration of general indifference to their art.[6]

The doctrine of self-reliance, sympathetically outlined by Emerson but quickly controverted by a lusty, expansive America, made deep inroads in American culture. Not only did self-reliance become a rationalization for self-interest, but it fed the basic antipathy to the non-productive member of society. Until very recently, even artists themselves doubted that they had a natural spiritual function, and almost never arrogated to themselves the right to philosophize. The ideal American—the go-getter, or the good-day's worker—lurked in nearly every painter's soul in those dark days before the late nineteen-forties, ready to do battle at the slightest hint of discouragement.

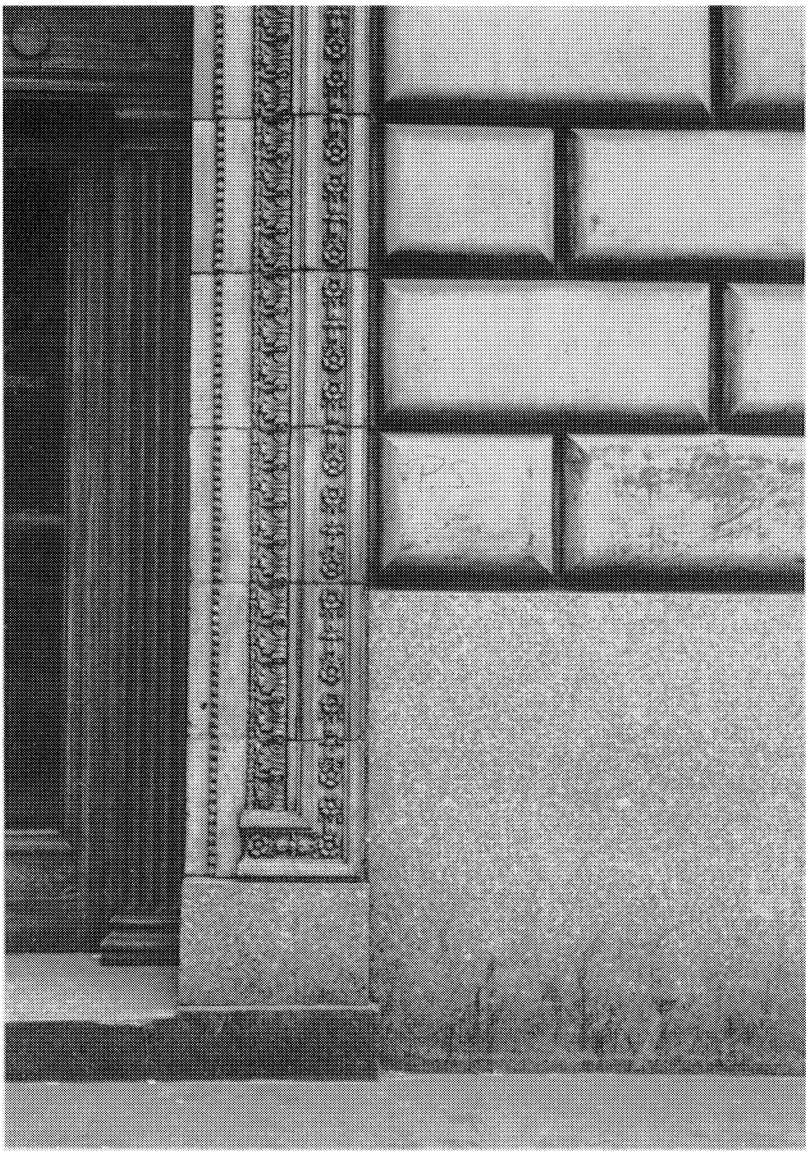
If the European vanguard artist could complacently regard himself as the enemy of the bourgeois and the stalwart upholder of intellectual criticism, his American counterpart seemed always to be beyond the pale of discussion. Once the European painter had accepted his inherited mantle as the enemy of bourgeois culture, he was free to concentrate on his own development within the ranks of the intelligentsia, where he had plenty of company. The American painter on the other hand could never find, as de Kooning once put it, a comfortable chair. To some extent the background against which he played out his internal drama served as a barrier to self-fulfillment. From Emerson's self-reliance to William James' pragmatism and John Dewey's instrumentalism, all American philosophic

doctrine tended to constrict the role of the dreamer. Practical consequences and action were the chief concerns of these anti-metaphysicians. The free-flowing discourse of the imagination, so essential to the nurture of the arts, was rejected the instant it appeared to lead to a body of theory (and theory, no matter how frequently modified, rejected, and overthrown, is still a vital part of the artist's equipment). William James, despite his rich intelligence, fed the native American utilitarian bias. Henry Bamford Parkes summarized James' contribution when he pointed out that

> it was from the American past that James acquired the distrust of abstract theory that pervaded his pragmatist epistemology, deriving it partly from the suspicion of dogmas and intellectual absolutes that had always been characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon mentality, and partly from the added emphasis on practical utility the American had acquired during the pioneering experience. . . . Above all, it was from the American past that he acquired his vision of the universe not as a cosmic order in which everything had its appointed place but as a scene of battle between good and evil, in which nothing was predetermined and the future was always uncertain.[7]

If James himself, by a supreme effort of carefully cultivated will, could declare that he believed in his own 'individuality and creative power,' those who grew up in the pragmatic society he helped to develop were much less successful. If truth was to be judged by the practical consequences of action, what was the artist to do for his measure of truth? There were, at least until the nineteen-thirties, all too few practical consequences with which to measure anything at all, much less the truth. The artist was thrown back again and again on the shoals of pariahdom. His individualism, while it supported America's professed faith in the individual, was hardly noticed and became finally a pernicious kind of loneliness (later to be known as alienation). This pre-ordained loneliness was only one of the multitude of problems with which the generations of 1900–20 grew up.

Another distinct problem lay in the American painting tradition itself, which derived both its virtue and its weakness from its provincialism. As far back as Asher B. Durand, who came back from his mid-nineteenth-century pilgrimage to Europe saying he would trade it all for the signboards of New York, the American painter had attempted to find his strength in local realities. Throughout the history of American painting there is ample evidence of conflicting attitudes—but there is also a persistent rejection of the sophisticated imports from Europe as somehow less virile than the work of the pioneering American could be. The two recurrent tendencies were



2. De Kooning and Denby were enthusiastic about Burckhardt's sober vision of the city during the nineteen-thirties. This typical Burckhardt photograph would have found little favor elsewhere since photography had been decisively consigned to social commentary.

represented on the one hand by the realists, who tried to deal with America's rawness in its own terms, and on the other by the romantics who, thanks largely to the resolute indifference of their society, projected themselves constantly into the uncertainties of both physical and spiritual existence. These contrasting attitudes can be found wherever you look in American art history. A neat juxtaposition occurs, for instance, in the decade between 1893 and 1903, when the majority of American painters had succumbed to the Genteel Tradition and were producing provincial imitations of European salon painting in an effort to win back the wealthy patrons who had abandoned the local artist.

But there were also major painters (although the robber barons were not aware of them) representing the two consistent American poles: Thomas Eakins, Winslow Homer, and Albert Pinkham Ryder. Eakins, pupil of Gérôme, advocate of scientific training for art students, experimenter with photography, and stern puritan, was, according to Walt Whitman, the only artist 'who could resist the temptation to see what they think ought to be rather than what is.' Eakins' puritanism, apparent neither in his life nor his pedagogy, was reserved for his art. His abhorrence of sensualism, so apparent in his remarks about the work of Rubens, for instance, was the probity of his art. Like Eakins, Homer detested artificiality. He wrote in 1880 that he wouldn't go across the street to see a Bouguereau because his pictures were false, waxy, and artificial. He thought of himself strictly as a realist, but his late works are infused with the romanticism of the solitary individual pitting his talents against the intransigent American elements. Ryder, who represents the epitome of American romanticism, made no pretence to objectivity, and worked out, instead, a genuine parallel to European symbolism in his moody landscapes. His relative unimportance in the nineteenth-century American scheme of things undoubtedly bolstered his inherent eccentricity.

The example of these neglected masters influenced the young painters at the turn of the century who started out again, as American artists had started out so often before, to relate themselves to their society. The obvious means had always been to accede to the public demand for illustration. The Eight, or the Ashcan School, began as newspaper illustrators (some were even war correspondents) and steadfastly maintained their interest in the passing American scene, even when they created their *succès de scandale* as painters. Their rebellion was aimed against the hypocrisies of the genteel academi-

cians in the interest of realism. The other rebellion—against American spiritual isolationism—occurred at the same time, and culminated in the Armory Show. Those who were most intimately affected by the travelling wonders of European avant-garde art were naturally the painters. Stuart Davis stated categorically that the Armory Show was the most important influence in his life, and others agreed. Stimulated by the profusion of new visual experience, the first small band of modern experimentalists made their largely unsuccessful bid for acknowledgment.

Out of their disheartening struggle, in which the demand for realism always obscured their existence and led directly into the social realism of the nineteen-thirties, the myth of the solitary genius drew sustenance. Many of the artists who gravitated to Europe during the nineteen-twenties and early thirties have remarked upon the complete absence of an artistic milieu in the United States, and above all, on the absence of verbal exchange and camaraderie among the painters. Paul Burlin once tartly commented that there was a total lack of discourse among artists in the first quarter of the century; and Carl Holty confirmed this observation, recalling that he went all the way to Germany in 1925 to study with Hans Hofmann in order to satisfy his need for contact. While these memories are probably exaggerated, it is undeniable that the American painters and sculptors in the first quarter of the century were isolated both from their society and from each other, and were perpetually hungry of spirit. The orgy of discourse that overtook America after the 1929 debacle had been pent up for a long time: it reflected the inherited problems clearly.

The contradictions with which the abstract-expressionist generation grappled form a significant chapter in their history. Implicit in the revolt against realism was the struggle to resist mass culture. For every one of their predecessors who had accommodated the rise of industrialism, there was now an antagonist. To those who were young in the late twenties, the idea of reportage was beneath contempt. The strong modern influence from Europe made old-fashioned realism seem hopelessly provincial: to be an illustrator was to renounce all aspirations to art. At the same time the artist who renounced the language of the masses suffered the shame of becoming *déclassé* and the anguish of the solitary traveler. If he were neither reporter nor flatterer, America had little use for him; yet, a longing to be acknowledged was never overcome. Until the myth of the artist as inspired soothsayer took root in the late nineteen-forties, the American painter

was almost always caught in his own conflicting desires to be wholly individualistic and, at the same time, a member of his society.

Until the Depression, then, there was little support for the artist's view of himself as a necessary functionary in a sound society. If there had been a point of contact between society and the artist's extreme isolation, many of the conflicts inherent in the early years of the century might never have erupted as violently as they did during the Depression. The absence of an artistic milieu—that median between society and the artist—was crucial. It was in the creation of such a milieu, in which the extraordinarily different temperaments of the abstract expressionist artists could find moral sustenance, that the nineteen-thirties mark a true art-historical epoch.