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Clyfford Still's Paths to Abstraction

When the pioneering Abstract Expressionist Clyfford Still died in 1980, his will stipulated that his estate be given to an American city willing to establish a permanent museum dedicated solely to his work, ensuring its survival for exhibition and study. The Clyfford Still Museum's tenth original exhibition, *The War Begins: Clyfford Still's Paths to Abstraction*, explores the artist's dynamic personal and creative journey through the years of World War II.

An only child of farmers, Still spent an isolated youth in Spokane, Washington, and Bow Island in southern Alberta, Canada. While he is known for developing an unprecedented abstract idiom that catalyzed postwar Abstract Expressionism, in his early years, Still was a prodigious self-taught draftsman tenaciously pursuing form and realism. From the fall of 1942 through the



summer of 1943, he contributed to the war effort, as was appropriate for a stalwart opponent of fascism and totalitarianism, by working as a steel checker for the Navy in Oakland, then for the Hammond Aircraft company. Simultaneously, mechanistic elements entered Still's imagery, alongside detailed studies of industrial engineering paraphernalia. These elements gave Still's work a new geometric. Although Still painted few oils in the early 1940s, they attained a striking, cryptic severity in which positive and negative spaces fuse together to form a tense equilibrium.

By the 1950s, Still had become critical of the way his art was judged and what he perceived as the decadence of the art world. He decided to sever ties with commercial galleries and, by 1961, had completely distanced himself from the art establishment, instead relocating to rural Maryland. Most





The War Begins: Clyfford Still's Paths to Abstraction is on view through January 18, 2015, at the Clyfford Still Museum, 1250 Bannock St., Denver, CO, 80204, 720-354-4880, www.clyffordstillmuseum.org. All illustrated images are by Clyfford Still from the Clyfford Still Museum and © City and County of Denver.

ABOVE: PH-326, 1942, o/c, 69 x 31.

ABOVE RIGHT: PH-620, 1942, o/c, 37 1/2 x 49.

RIGHT: PH-672, 1923, o/c, 18 x 15 1/2.

ABOVE LEFT: PH-303, 1943, o/c, 59 x 37.

LEFT: PH-618, 1942, o/c, 42 x 33.

FAR LEFT: PH-269 (*Portrait of Artist's Father*), 1941, o/c, 20 1/8 x 16.

of Still's output then remained hidden from the public eye until 1979, when the Metropolitan Museum of Art granted him the largest survey afforded by the institution to the work of any living artist up to that time. This was also the last occasion the artist's works would be seen until the opening of the Clyfford Still Museum in 2011.