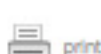


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Lightning Bolt: A Realization of Clyfford Still

by Anne Sassoon



Interior view of the Clyfford Still Art Museum, courtesy of the Clyfford Still Art Museum and Allied Works Architecture.

Strange how it can happen that an artist whose work you are very familiar with, and have walked past in museums many times with no desire to linger, can suddenly sock you in the gut. Why I suddenly saw Clyfford Still or felt his emotional impact after all these years, when coming upon a painting in the Met on a particular day, I don't know. Neither do I know why I had been immune to him for so long.

Like the best painting from cave art onwards, Still's work is as alive and raw as if made today. His characteristic lightning shapes are a bit like the flashes that follow on the heels of Superman. They direct the eye, they activate the composition; actually they *are* the composition. They suggest a rip or wound in the skin of the paint, something damaged or hurt, while at the same time opening a window of light and color in the otherwise emptiness or murky impasto of the canvas. Still must have gone through countless gallons of black. Either pessimistically or optimistically, the rips and flashes seem to reveal an intimacy and vulnerability, creating a touching counterpoint to the bravado and strong ego that the work communicates — if you are open to being touched by it.

Still's importance was quickly recognised by his peers when he arrived in New York in the 1940s, a fully formed abstract painter with his own distinctive visual language, of whom Jackson Pollock said, "Still makes the rest of us look academic." The Metropolitan Museum, in 1979, described him as, "America's most important, most significant and most daring artist," as they presented the first big survey of his work. It was, in fact, the first big solo exhibition they had given any artist to date. Clement Greenberg said he was, "One of the most important and original painters of our time — perhaps the most original of all painters under 55, if not the best." Still responded by saying that the critics were "butchers" and the galleries were "brothels." Of the artists he said, "You know your brother has a knife, and will use it." In the early 1950s, he broke all ties with the commercial galleries, and by the mid-1960s was living in Maryland, where he worked in isolation for the rest of his life.



Clyfford Still, PH-945, 1946. Oil on canvas, 53.5 x 43 inches.

Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Art Museum. © City and County of Denver.

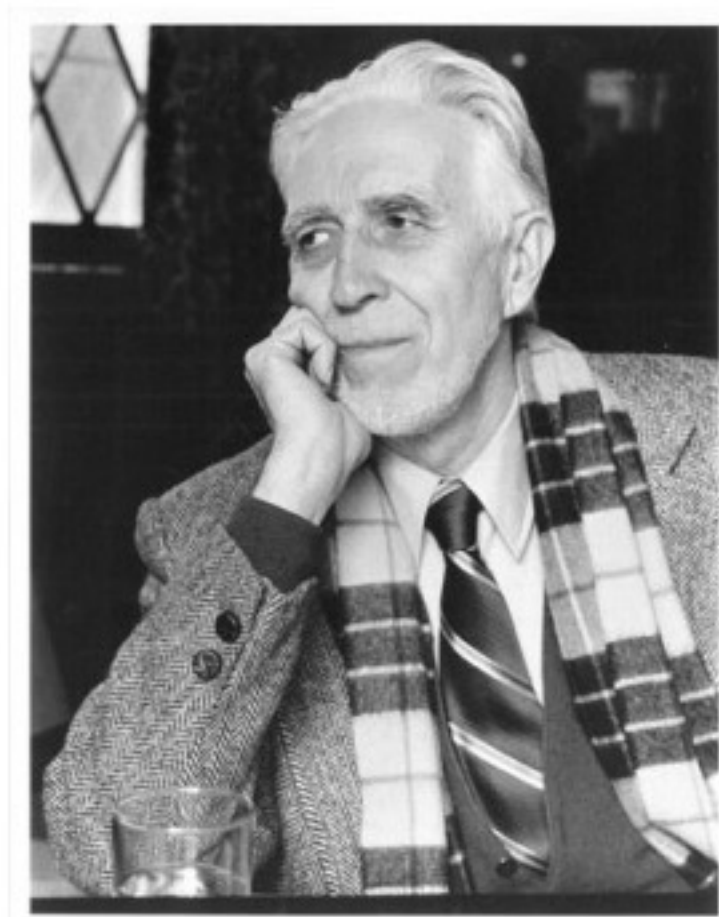
Despite continuing acclaim as a pioneer of Abstract Expressionism, he has never had the fame or popularity of Pollock, Mark Rothko, Philip Guston or Willem de Kooning, his close contemporaries whose influence continues to ripple through painting. I was not the only one to walk past those big, jagged, ragged paintings, unmoved.

Since 2011, however, with the establishment of his own private fortress of a museum in Denver Colorado, Still has the edge over everyone. There, in strict conformity with the stipulations of his will, no other artist may be shown, and none of his works loaned, sold, given away or exchanged, but only exhibited and studied in a peaceful, spacious environment — without the distraction of a museum shop or café on the premises. Why Denver? Still was born in North Dakota; the land and the people of the Midwest were the subjects of his early work. Mostly, though, the civic leaders of Denver found themselves able and willing to accommodate his demands.

Only a matter of days after my epiphany at the Met, by coincidence, and without prior knowledge of the existence of the Clyfford Still Museum, I happened to be in Denver. The approach to the museum is through a small grove of trees, isolating it from its midtown surroundings, especially its attention-grabbing next-door neighbor, the exciting but dysfunctional Denver Art Museum, designed by Daniel Libeskind, where the sloping walls make it almost impossible to hang a painting.

How different the respectful atmosphere created at the Still Museum by Allied Works Architecture, headed by Brad Cloepfil, with his "drive to make, not new things, but excruciatingly specific things." The study rooms are downstairs and the galleries upstairs in this textured concrete building. The paintings are bathed in natural light that filters through a perforated skylight, showing them at their best. The light invites you upstairs, and makes you feel good when you get there. The ceilings are lower than usual in today's museums, more like the spaces where Still worked and exhibited in his lifetime, and they contribute to the sense of comfort and contemplation.

The work itself is almost literally electrifying, generating light and movement in the gray galleries. There's an intense relationship between the paintings, and a conceptual narrative runs through them that would be broken by the inclusion of another artist. This larger-than-life, tough, totally self-assured painter was right to insist on having a museum to himself.



Portrait of Clyfford Still. © Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Image courtesy of the G. Robert Strauss, Jr. Memorial Library, Gallery Archives, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York.

I was reminded of the words of a highly respected London gallerist, who told me (20 years ago) that he had been moved almost to tears by seeing Still's work. This was so incomprehensible to me at the time that I have never forgotten it. But these monumental paintings do convey equally monumental emotion, which is both grandiose and completely sincere. To quote Still: "These are not paintings in the usual sense. They are life and death merging in fearful union. They kindle a fire; through them I breathe again, hold a golden cord, find my own revelation."

The words could be Wagnerian. Whether the passion that Still put into his painting reflects his feelings in the aftermath of World War II, or the more direct, personal experience of a lonely, impoverished childhood, the sense of a heroic battle for survival is incorporated in the work. Still believed that art could and must change the world.

In photographs Still looks self-conscious, posing in profile to survey his Maryland property, or before one of his paintings. His long, white-streaked hair and deep-set, angst-ridden eyes give him a rather haunted look. And the house itself could be the creepy creation of Alfred Hitchcock, or Edward Hopper.

Still died in 1980, leaving an incredible 3,182 canvases and works on paper, many of which remain rolled up in the Clyfford Still Museum, having been seen by only a handful of people. Only 500 or so works have so far been shown, but they more than justify the judgement of his contemporaries. The value of the paintings is estimated to be over \$1 billion — just as Still always knew. But they can never be sold.



Clyfford Still, PH-401, 1957. Oil on canvas, 113 x 155 inches.

Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Art Museum. © City and County of Denver.