Known mostly for his paintings, Clyfford Still drew prolifically, and he produced thousands of works of paper throughout his 60-year career as an artist. Opportunities to see them, however, are rare: outside of Denver’s Clyfford Still Museum, only seven drawings are known to exist in public collections. The museum itself boasts a collection of over 2,300 — it actually owns most (94%) of the Stills in the world — and this fall, it will exhibit the first-ever exhibition dedicated entirely to Still’s paper work, with its largest exhibition to date featuring over 240 of them.
Organized chronologically, many of the works will be on view for the first time. While oil and pastels were his media of choice for painting, Still explored a full range of drawing material: he did work with oils and pastels, but he also created colorful, dynamic works with watercolor, gouache, graphite, pen and ink, charcoal, crayon, and tempera, too.

*Clifford Still: The Works on Paper* features early graphite drawings that are more akin to sketches, but there are also expressive line drawings that may stand as subject matter in their own right. Other works are studies for later and larger paintings; some are drawings Still made after his paintings. Many are predictably abstract creations, but accompanying them are also landscapes and portraits of Still and his family that the artist produced in the mid-1920s.

“Still’s drawings were sometimes a preparatory step towards making a major painting but were also works executed after a related painting in which the artist continued to work out his ideas,” the museum’s director and exhibition’s curator Dean Sobel told Hyperallergic. “Drawing was both a continual wellspring for summoning ideas as well as a means for further development of ideas that Still first executed in other media.” Still’s fond use of a palette knife in both his drawings and paintings, Sobel added, emphasizes how line and drawing remained at the heart of his practice.

Despite his foray into diverse media, it’s clear that Still had an affinity for pastels. Over half of his works on paper were executed in those pigments as the artist was attracted to their quality of line and available color range, Sobel said. Still produced over a thousand pastel works on paper during the last two decades of his life, purchasing dime store-bought, colored construction paper to serve as his uniform backgrounds, already preset in hue.
“During this 20-year period, there was also a greater correlation between the mark making that Still executed on canvasses and on works on paper, as well as between the composition of the paintings and the works on paper in terms of the relationship between positive and negative space,” Sobel said.

Curiously, while Still focused on creating over 100 oils on paper between 1934 and 1944, he never returned to the medium for his drawings ever again. At the museum, visitors won’t have much chance to see Still’s more famous oils on canvas, either, as with very few exceptions, no paintings will grace the walls of the galleries. The spaces’s new fall look may make immediate comparisons between Still’s approach to drawing and painting difficult to consider, but the museum is clearly attempting to focus much-needed attention on a historically overlooked aspect of a widely renowned figure of Abstract Expressionism.
Clyfford Still, “PP-26” (1922), pastel on paper
Clyfford Still, “PWX-4” (ca. 1950), watercolor on paper
Clyfford Still, “PP-136” (1957), pastel on paper

Clyfford Still, “PP-40” (1959), pastel on paper
Clyfford Still, “PP-7” (1935), pastel on paper
Clyfford Still, “PH-93” (1944), oil on paper
Clyfford Still, "PH-471" (1944), oil on paper
Clyfford Still, “PH-556” (1949), gouache on paper.
Clyfford Still, “PH-556,” (1949), gouache on paper
Clyfford Still, “PP-1448” (1980), pastel on paper

Clyfford Still, “PP-40” (1959), pastel on paper