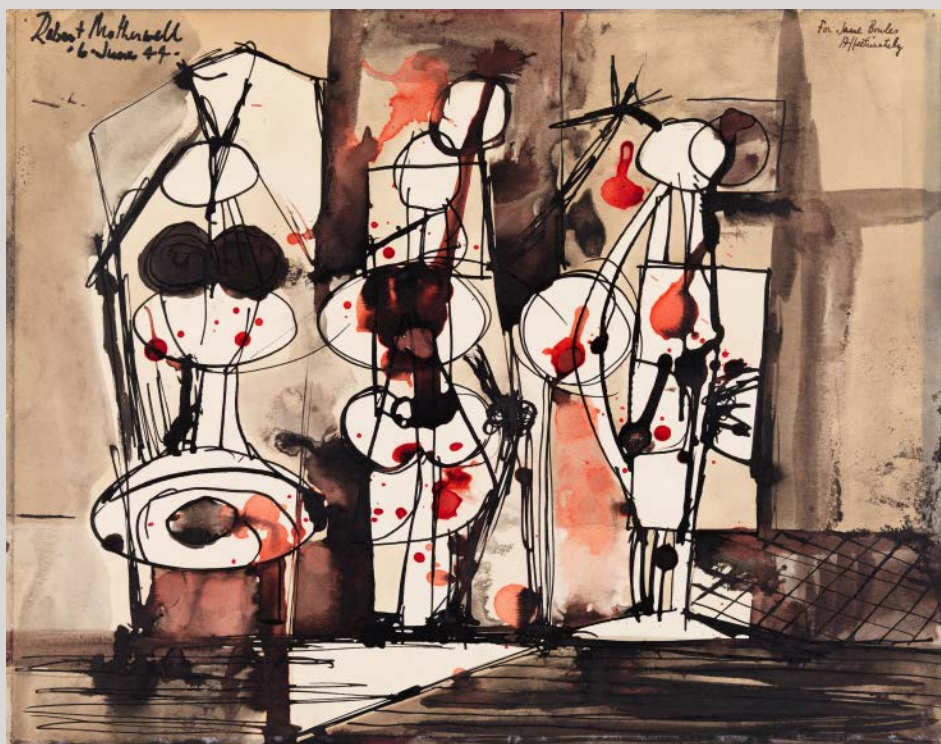


# Robert Motherwell Drawing



*As Fast as the  
Mind Itself*



Robert Motherwell, *Three Figures Shot*, 1944. Ink on paper, 11  $\frac{7}{16}$   $\times$  14  $\frac{3}{8}$  in. (29.1  $\times$  36.5 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Purchase, with funds from the Burroughs Wellcome Purchase Fund and the National Endowment for the Arts

The youngest and most erudite of the Abstract Expressionists, Robert Motherwell (1915–1991) created an important body of drawings in a wide range of techniques and styles over the course of his prolific artistic career. His interest in drawing stemmed from a fascination with paper as a support and from a continuous search for a personal, spontaneous language of mark-making. Inspired by Surrealism and the practice of automatic drawing, he embraced the agency and suggestive potential of his materials, blending the accidental and the intentional in the creative gesture, whether a stroke of the pen or the brush or a tear in paper.

Motherwell sought to define his own subject matter by devising of his own artistic language: namely, graphic and pictorial means that allowed him to express and give form to his understanding of the world. His imagery was predominantly abstract from the outset, but rarely absolutely abstract, and his practice was geared toward invention and variation. And while it evolved stylistically, it remained united by thematic continuities and his desire to draw “as fast as the mind itself.” In drawing he found a nimble medium that suited his need for speed and immediacy.

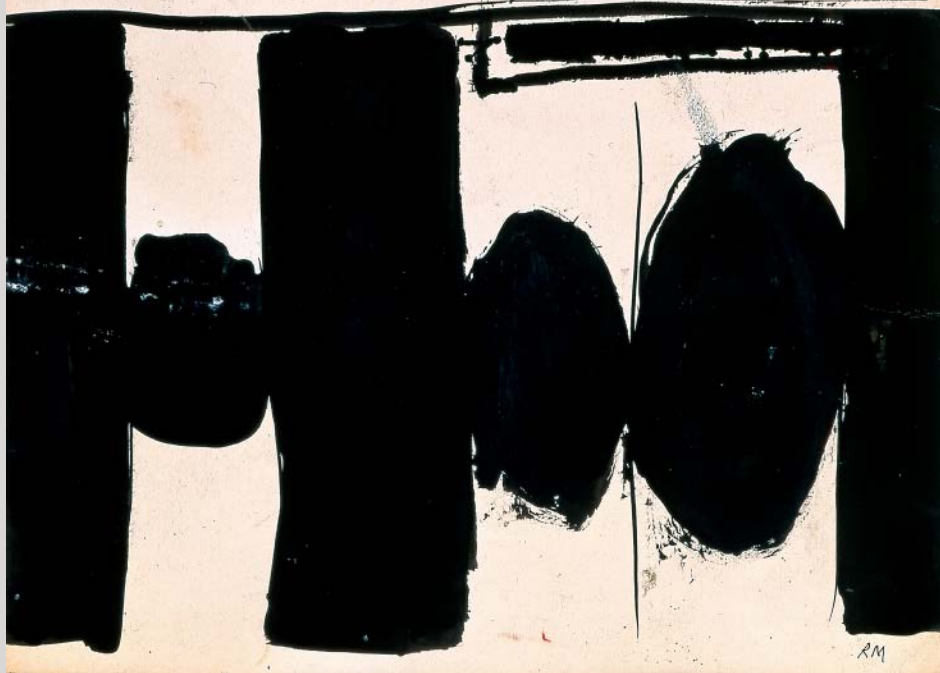
The artist’s intentional approach to drawing was multifaceted: conceptually, functionally, and materially. He employed a wide range of supports and mediums, and he drew with different purposes in mind — exploration, study, preparation, or sheer pleasure. Most importantly, he conceived of drawing as having different modes or basic ways in which the medium expresses itself or is experienced. His range as a draftsman was unusually broad, spanning the geometric and the calligraphic, and he sometimes used these modes concurrently, as his career did not follow a straight line.

Motherwell’s earliest drawings were very experimental and primarily concerned with linear structure. In the summer of 1941, while in Mexico, he made important abstract drawings in his so-called *Mexican Sketchbook*. He started from the Surrealist principle of psychic automatism, or spontaneous, preconscious doodling on a page, which allowed him to probe his subconscious and stimulate his imagination while exploring the possibilities of his medium. After free, rapid scribbling, he deliberately filled in some of his lines with black ink, partly obscuring the image beneath. The result was vaguely organic shapes that are either two-dimensional or with a very limited sense of space.

I know who had sent them in those  
green cases.

Who doesn't lose his mind will receive  
like me

That wire in my neck up to the ear.



Robert Motherwell, *Elegy to the Spanish Republic No. 1*, 1948.  
Ink on paper. 10  $\frac{3}{4}$   $\times$  8  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (27.3  $\times$  21.8 cm). The Museum of  
Modern Art, New York. Gift of the artist, 1988

In the mid-1940s, Motherwell investigated the issue of figural structure, at times conceiving of figures as being architectonic, which, along with roughly hatched cast shadows, implies the existence of space. His energetic line closely interacts with color: in *Three Figures Shot*, fluid spots of red watercolor convey pure energy and aggression. The composition evokes the firing squads of the Spanish Civil War, which was a thematic preoccupation for the young artist, who later realized that the drawing was a subliminal representation of his father, mother, and himself. The composition also speaks to the tension between abstraction and representation, and achieves a harmonious balance between rectilinear and ovoid forms.

This formal dialogue between the organic and the geometric eventually led to the abstract, frieze-like compositional structure of the 1948 drawing now known as *Elegy to the Spanish Republic No. 1*, which represents a breakthrough. It is arguably the most generative work on paper of Motherwell's entire career, as it led to his large, signature series of drawings and paintings known as the Elegies. He discovered the format, based on tension and conflict, and a style of his own, while creating an image to accompany a Harold Rosenberg poem for an avant-garde magazine. Limiting his palette to black and white to ensure effective reproduction, he started with a linear automatism; he then sought to clarify the composition by blacking out areas within the linear web, and transferred it to a new sheet of paper. The final drawing shows flat, silhouetted, and abutting rectangles and ovoids confined to a single plane, a structural schema that rejects illusionistic depth. It also marked a paring down of his use of color, and his exploration of visual and symbolic possibilities of the colors white and black. The artist would return to the basic structure of the Elegy for decades to come, creating endless variations on the motif.

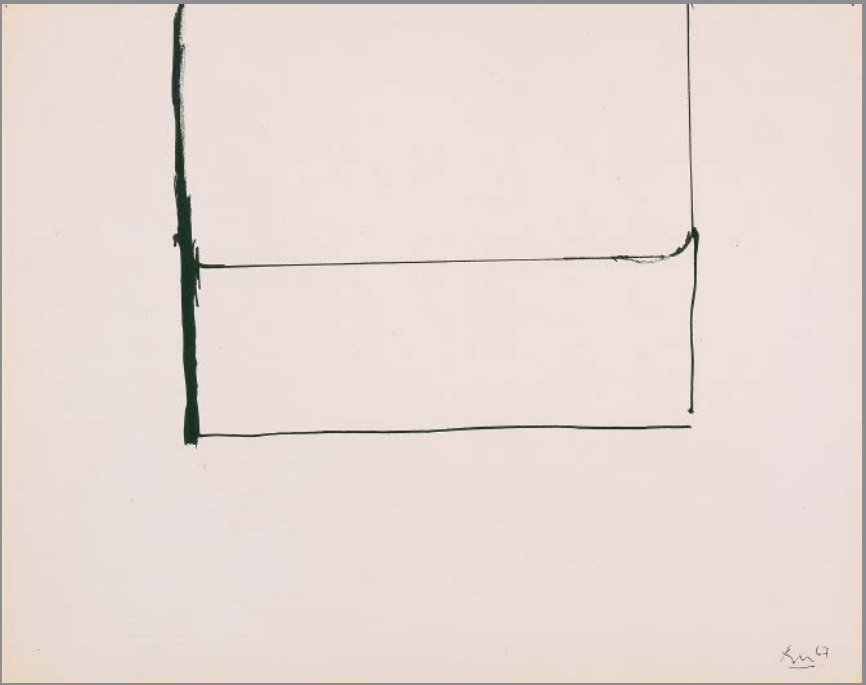
While Motherwell largely relied on the structural mode during the first decade of his career, other modes came to dominate, notably what he referred to as the calligraphic. Calligraphy, a graphic or painterly approach to mark-making traditionally related to writing, deeply appealed to the artist. He explained: "You learn from Japanese calligraphy to let the hand take over: then you begin to watch the hand as though it is not yours, but as though it is someone else's.... That is a whole different way of drawing."

Motherwell employed the methods of Zen painting to create his *Lyric Suite* of 1965, his largest series in any medium and one of his greatest achievements on paper. He used a watercolor brush to apply a few strokes of ink onto Japanese "rice paper," which provided a surface that he loved. He embraced his inability to control the bleeding of the inks in the absorbent paper. The role of chance was central to his conception of the *Lyric Suite*, which comprises more than 500 works.

Another key mode of drawing for Motherwell was what he termed "the division of spatial extension by line." Consider an early work from his "Open" series, *Open Drawing* from 1967. The series grew out of the random juxtaposition of two canvases that year. While working in the studio, Motherwell found a "beautiful proportion" in a smaller canvas leaning against a big one and used charcoal to trace its outline on the larger canvas. The resulting mark could be interpreted as representing a door in a wall. The artist inverted the composition, and developed it as a series of color field paintings in which the drawn line plays a crucial role. Over time, the shape evolved in different configurations and scales, and appears on a variety of supports, notably paper and cardboard. The line acquired an expressive graphic quality through a slightly tremulous, freehand application of the ink. The lines do not construct an illusionistic space per se, rather they open up a sense of depth by fracturing the unity of ground. Conceptually, the Opens represented a shift in his thinking about drawing as they gave central significance to empty space.

Ultimately, Motherwell the draftsman was interested in the expressive value of the mark or stroke, not in the imitation of reality. He understood that drawing could be approached in a variety of ways, and explored these modalities as he sought to chart an original and deeply personal artistic path.





Top Robert Motherwell, *Open Drawing*, 1967. Ink on paper, 11 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 14 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (28.9 × 36.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection Gift, 2005

Bottom Robert Motherwell, *Lyric Suite (D899)*, 1965. Ink on paper, 9 × 11 in. (22.9 × 27.9 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Promised gift of Susanne and William E. Pritchard III

The exhibition is curated by Edouard Kopp, John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation Chief Curator, Menil Drawing Institute.

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## Public Programs

All programs will be held at the Menil Drawing Institute unless otherwise indicated.

### PANEL DISCUSSION

*Cataloguing Robert Motherwell's Drawings*

Friday, November 18, 6–7 p.m.

Art historian and author Katy Rogers of the Dedalus Foundation joins the Menil Drawing Institute's Chief Curator Edouard Kopp and Director of Publishing Joseph N. Newland for a discussion about the making of the catalogue raisonné devoted to Robert Motherwell's drawings.

### CONVERSATION

*Artists on Robert Motherwell*

Thursday, January 12, 6–7:30 p.m.

With Phong Bui, Joseph Havel, and Angel Otero

### LECTURE

*Edith Devaney, art historian, on Robert Motherwell*

Thursday, February 9, 7–8 p.m.

All public programs are free and open to everyone.  
Please check [menil.org/events](https://menil.org/events) for more information.

## Exhibition Dates

November 18, 2022 — March 12, 2023

Menil Drawing Institute  
The Menil Collection

Front Robert Motherwell, *Rimbaud Series No. 3*, 1967.  
Ink on acetate, 14 × 11 in. (35.6 × 27.9 cm). Maxine and  
Stuart Frankel Foundation for Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI

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