

WHITNEY

Whitney Museum
of American Art
Press Office

99 Gansevoort Street
New York, NY 10014

pressoffice@whitney.org
(212) 570-3633

PRESS RELEASE



Norman Lewis (1909-1979), *American Totem*, 1960. Oil on canvas, 73 1/2 × 44 7/8 in. (186.7 × 114 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund in memory of Preston Robert and Joan Tisch, the Painting and Sculpture Committee, Director's Discretionary Fund, Adolph Gottlieb, by exchange, and Sami and Hala Mnaymneh 2018.141. © Norman Lewis. Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

Whitney Acquires Norman Lewis Masterwork

NEW YORK, February 7, 2019 – The Whitney Museum of American Art is pleased to announce that it has acquired Norman Lewis's *American Totem* (1960), one of his most iconic paintings.

Lewis (1909-1979), who was born in Harlem, was a central but often under-appreciated figure in the Abstract Expressionist movement. One of the few African American artists associated with the New York School, he was the only black artist to participate in the 1950 closed-door sessions that Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline organized to define this burgeoning movement. Lewis also was a founding member of Spiral, a group that included Charles Alston, Emma Amos, Romare Bearden, and Hale Woodruff, among others. These artists were keenly concerned with how art might engage in questions of racial inequality and struggle, while remaining committed to discovering new formal and expressive possibilities in their work.

American Totem (1960) was made nearly a decade after Lewis's first solo exhibition at the Willard Gallery in 1949, a period that earned him a reputation but neither the financial rewards nor exhibition opportunities of his peers. Transitioning from calligraphic forms that implied groups or processions, Lewis began a series of black-and-white paintings that explored the emotional and psychic impact of this turbulent historical moment in American history. While the totem the painting evokes is the infamous hooded Klansman, the figure itself is composed of a multitude of forms resembling apparitions, skulls, and masks. The implication of Lewis's work, painted at the height of the civil rights movement, is that terror is both representable and abstract, conscious and unconscious, visible and hidden. "One of Lewis's most important paintings," said Adam D. Weinberg, Alice Pratt Brown Director of the Whitney, "this acquisition will allow the Whitney to more effectively portray the complex history of American art at mid-century. Lewis's painting suggests the power of an object to accommodate both reflection and action. We are thrilled that this work has entered the Whitney's collection, and it would not have been realized without the generous leadership gift from Laurie Tisch, our longtime trustee and former Co-Chairman of the Board."

Scott Rothkopf, Senior Deputy Director and Nancy and Steve Crown Family Chief Curator, stated: "Although the Whitney first acquired Lewis's work nearly thirty years ago, our curators have spent almost a decade assiduously searching for the perfect painting to honor his extraordinary achievement within the context of our collection. We are excited to unveil *American Totem* to our audiences this summer."

Throughout his career, Lewis pursued his unique artistic vision while also remaining committed to his political beliefs. From 1965 to 1971, he taught for HARYOU-ACT, Inc. (Harlem Youth in Action), an antipoverty program designed to encourage young men and women to stay in school. In 1969, Lewis joined Bearden, Benny Andrews, Roy DeCarava, Clifford Joseph, Alice Neel, and others in picketing the infamous *Harlem on My Mind* show at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. That same year, he, Bearden, and Ernest Crichlow co-founded Cinqué Gallery, dedicated to fostering the careers of emerging artists of color.

A recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Grant (1972), a Mark Rothko Foundation Individual Artists Grant (1972), and a Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship (1975), Lewis had his first retrospective exhibition in 1976 at the CUNY Graduate Center, New York. Despite the artistic achievement and critical acclaim Lewis attained in his lifetime, it was not until the late twentieth century that his work began to occupy a central place in the canon of American art. In 1998, The Studio Museum in Harlem presented the survey *Norman Lewis: Black Paintings, 1946-1977*. More recently, his work has also been celebrated in group exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2010); The Jewish Museum, New York (2016); Haus der Kunst, Munich (2016); Musée du Quai Branly, Paris (2016); Royal Academy of Arts, London (2016); Detroit Institute of Arts (2017); Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St. Louis, MO (2017); The Phillips Collection in Washington, DC (2017); and elsewhere. Additionally, his work is part of the major exhibition *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, which debuted at the Tate Modern, London, in 2017. In 2015, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA) organized *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis*, the first comprehensive museum overview of the artist's work. The landmark survey was also shown at Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, and Chicago Cultural Center.

Curator and art historian Ruth Fine, who curated *Procession*, noted: "The paintings and drawings that are grouped as Norman Lewis's civil rights works are among the most provocative and charged of their period, brilliantly melding the artist's political and aesthetic concerns. It is especially fitting that the Whitney, New York's great museum of American art, now owns *American Totem*, among the earliest of these canvases and an icon of the twentieth (and perhaps the twenty-first) century."

American Totem is the first painting by Lewis to be acquired by the Whitney. The work will be included in a new presentation of the Whitney's collection, in a gallery dedicated to the New York School, alongside paintings by Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Joan Mitchell, Mark Rothko, and others. The exhibition will open on June 28, 2019 in the Museum's seventh-floor Robert W. Wilson Galleries.

About the Whitney

The Whitney Museum of American Art, founded in 1930 by the artist and philanthropist Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875-1942), houses the foremost collection of American art from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Mrs. Whitney, an early and ardent supporter of modern American art, nurtured groundbreaking artists at a time when audiences were still largely preoccupied with the Old Masters. From her vision arose the Whitney Museum of American Art, which has been championing the most innovative art of the United States for more than eighty years. The core of the Whitney's mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and exhibit American art of our time and serve a wide variety of audiences in celebration of the complexity and diversity of art and culture in the United States. Through this mission and a steadfast commitment to artists themselves, the Whitney has long been a powerful force in support of modern and contemporary art and continues to help define what is innovative and influential in American art today.

Current and Upcoming Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art

Programmed: Rules, Codes, and Choreographies in Art, 1965 – 2018	September 28, 2018 – April 14, 2019
Andy Warhol – From A to B and Back Again	November 12, 2018 – March 31, 2019
Kevin Beasley: A view of a landscape	December 15 – March 10, 2019
Where We Are: Selections from the Whitney's Collection 1900–1960	Ongoing
Derek Fordjour: Half Mast	Ongoing
2019 Whitney Biennial	May 17 – September 22, 2019
Spilling Over: Painting Color in the 1960s	Opens March 29, 2019
Moved by the Motion: Sudden Rise	April 26–27, 2019
Jason Moran	September 20, 2019 – January 5, 2020
Rachel Harrison	October 25, 2019 – January 12, 2020
Pope.L: Instigation, Aspiration, Perspiration	Opens October/November 2019

The Whitney Museum of American Art is located at 99 Gansevoort Street between Washington and West Streets, New York City. Museum hours are: Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Sunday from 10:30 am to 6 pm; Friday and Saturday from 10:30 am to 10 pm. Closed Tuesday except in July and August, and in March 2019 during the exhibition *Andy Warhol—From A to B and Back Again*. Adults: \$25. Full-time students, visitors 65 & over, and visitors with disabilities: \$18. Visitors 18 years & under and Whitney members: FREE. Admission is pay-what-you-wish on Fridays, 7–10 pm. For general information, please call (212) 570-3600 or visit whitney.org.

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