

WHITNEY

Press Release

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THE WHITNEY TO PRESENT *SIGNS & SYMBOLS*, THIRD IN SERIES OF SIX SHOWS REASSESSING THE COLLECTION

June 28-October 28, 2012



Theodoros Stamos (b. 1922), *Ancestral Worship*, 1947. © Estate of Theodoros Stamos

NEW YORK, May 14, 2012 -- *Signs & Symbols*, the third in a series of six exhibitions focused on the Whitney's collection, takes stock of the period from the mid-1940s to the end of the

1950s, drawing upon the Museum's deep collection of paintings, sculpture, drawings, prints, and photographs. This exhibition reconsiders this critical postwar moment—a time perhaps most frequently associated with a select group of Abstract Expressionists and their large-scale, highly abstract canvases and gestural brushwork. By contrast and through a more textured narrative, *Signs & Symbols* highlights primarily abstract work completed on diverse scales, engaged with more figurative signs and symbols, and by a larger group of artists, many of whom are lesser known and rarely exhibited. The exhibition, curated by Donna De Salvo, the Whitney's Chief Curator and Deputy Director for Programs, in collaboration with Jane Panetta, opens on June 28 and remains on view through October 28 in the Mildred & Herbert Lee Galleries on the Whitney's second floor.

Donna De Salvo comments: "The postwar period that *Signs & Symbols* makes its subject has become so identified with the heroic abstraction of New York School painting that it's easy to overlook the broader, more nuanced investigations into representation and abstraction that occupied artists throughout the country at the time. The Whitney's collection is wonderfully rich in these experiments as they play out nationally. And from the vantage of 2012, the range and variety of abstractions mediated by figurative signs and symbols takes on a new order of interest."

While key canonized Abstract Expressionists play an essential part in the exhibition (often represented by atypical examples of their work), among them Jackson Pollock, Adolph Gottlieb, Lee Krasner, Robert Motherwell, Richard Pousette-Dart, Barnett Newman, Franz Kline, and Mark Rothko, the show's scope extends to the work of artists less immediately associated with the period such as Ivan Le Lorraine Albright, Will Barnet, Forrest Bess, Byron Browne, Dorothy Dehner, Herbert Ferber, Ellwood Graham, Morris Graves, David Hare, John Ward Lockwood, Boris Margo, Alice Trumbull Mason, Alfonso Ossorio, Anne Ryan, Charles Seliger, Theodoros Stamos, Richard Stankiewicz, Mark Tobey, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Hugh Townley, and Steve Wheeler.

In considering the nature of this work, the exhibition presents examples indebted to a range of diverse influences, including Native American art, the role of mythic imagery, Eastern

calligraphy, and the surrounding natural world. These influences worked to establish a new national aesthetic imbued with universal meaning that attempted to move beyond European Cubism and Surrealism. To achieve this, many of the artists presented here utilized highly personal and symbolic systems as the formal basis for their work—whether through calligraphic marks, pictograms, invented languages, or symbolic forms functioning as referential markers.

For example, the installation includes artists such as Morris Graves, Norman Lewis, Charles Seliger, and Mark Tobey—abstract artists often sidelined in this narrative despite having made calligraphic and highly symbolic work related to notions of a universal unconscious. Artists such as Adolph Gottlieb and Bradley Walker Tomlin explicitly utilized pictograms and calligraphic mark-making as an alternative to representation, striving to establish an alternative vocabulary for abstraction. The show also highlights Indian Space painters such as Will Barnet and Steve Wheeler—artists whose all-over compositions were inspired by the flatness and geometric characteristics present in Native American art. Ultimately, these varied investigations contributed an important foundation for the next generation of artists that emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s; Jasper Johns and Roy Lichtenstein, also included in the exhibition, readily embraced distinctly American subjects while similarly incorporating highly individualized systems of signs and symbols into their work.

This is the third in a multiyear series of six shows reassessing the Whitney's collection in anticipation of the Museum's move downtown in 2015. The earlier exhibitions were *Breaking Ground: The Whitney's Founding Collection* and *Real/Surreal*. The fourth in the series is *Sinister Pop*, which opens on November 15, 2012.

Exhibition Support

Ongoing support for the permanent collection and major support for *Signs & Symbols* is provided by Bank of America.



About the Whitney

The Whitney Museum of American Art is the world's leading museum of twentieth-century and contemporary art of the United States. Focusing particularly on works by living artists, the Whitney is celebrated for presenting important exhibitions and for its renowned collection, which comprises over 19,000 works by more than 2,900 artists. With a history of exhibiting the most promising and influential artists and provoking intense debate, the Whitney Biennial, the Museum's signature exhibition, has become the most important survey of the state of contemporary art in the United States. In addition to its landmark exhibitions, the Museum is known internationally for events and educational programs of exceptional significance and as a center for research, scholarship, and conservation.

Founded by sculptor and arts patron Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney in 1930, the Whitney was first housed on West 8th Street in Greenwich Village. The Museum relocated in 1954 to West 54th Street and, in 1966, inaugurated its present home, designed by Marcel Breuer, at 945 Madison Avenue on the Upper East Side. While its vibrant program of exhibitions and events continues uptown, the Whitney is moving forward with a new building project, designed by Renzo Piano, in downtown Manhattan. Located at the corner of Gansevoort and Washington Streets in the Meatpacking District, at the southern entrance to the High Line, the new building, which has generated immense momentum and support, will enable the Whitney to vastly increase the size and scope of its exhibition and programming space. Ground was broken on the new building in May 2011, and it is projected to open to the public in 2015.

Current and Upcoming Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art

Whitney Biennial	Through May 27, 2012
Singular Visions	Through July 15, 2012
Sharon Hayes	June 21-September 9, 2012
Signs & Symbols	June 28-October 28, 2012
Oskar Fischinger	June 28-October 28, 2012
Yayoi Kusama	July 12-September 30, 2012

The Whitney Museum is located at 945 Madison Avenue at 75th Street, New York City. Museum hours are: Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., Friday from 1 p.m. to 9 p.m., closed Monday and Tuesday. General admission: \$18. Full-time students and visitors ages 19–25 and 62 & over: \$12. Visitors 18 & under and Whitney members: FREE. Admission is pay-what-you-wish on Fridays, 6–9 p.m. For general information, please call (212) 570-3600 or visit whitney.org.

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