

De Kooning: An American Master

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Willem de Kooning is one of the most important artists of the twentieth century, a true "painter's painter" whose protean work continues to inspire many artists. In the thirties and forties, along with Arshile Gorky and Jackson Pollock, he became a key figure in the revolutionary American movement of abstract expressionism. Of all the painters in that group, he worked the longest and was the most prolific, creating powerful, startling images well into the 1980s.

The first major biography of de Kooning captures both the life and work of this complex, romantic figure in American culture. Ten years in the making, and based on previously unseen letters and documents as well as on hundreds of interviews, this is a fresh, richly detailed, and masterful portrait. The young de Kooning overcame an unstable, impoverished, and often violent early family life to enter the Academie in Rotterdam, where he learned both classic art and guild techniques. Arriving in New York as a stowaway from Holland in 1926, he underwent a long struggle to become a painter and an American, developing a passionate friendship with his fellow immigrant Arshile Gorky, who was both a mentor and an inspiration. During the Depression, de Kooning emerged as a central figure in the bohemian world of downtown New York, surviving by doing commercial work and painting murals for the WPA. His first show at the Egan Gallery in 1948 was a revelation. Soon, the critics Harold Rosenberg and Thomas Hess were championing his work, and de Kooning took his place as the charismatic leader of the New York school—just as American art began to dominate the international scene.

Dashingly handsome and treated like a movie star on the streets of downtown New York, de Kooning had a tumultuous marriage to Elaine de Kooning, herself a fascinating character of the period. At the height of his fame, he spent his days painting powerful abstractions and intense, disturbing pictures of the female figure—and his nights living on the edge, drinking, womanizing, and talking at the Cedar bar with such friends as Franz Kline and Frank O'Hara. By the 1960s, exhausted by the feverish art world, he retreated to the Springs on Long Island, where he painted an extraordinary series of lush pastorals. In the 1980s, as he slowly declined into what was almost certainly Alzheimer's, he created a vast body of haunting and ethereal late work.

This is an authoritative and brilliant exploration of the art, life, and world of an American master.

Gossipier than any tabloid, as scholarly as Vasari, luminously illustrated and illuminating as a lightning bolt, Stevens' and Swan's landmark biography is one of the most stunning art books I've seen in seven years of Amazon.com reviewing—a masterpiece that explains how the Dutchman de Kooning became the master painter of the American century. It's a page-turning tale: raised by a mom who beat him with wooden shoes, de Kooning escaped Rotterdam as a stowaway on a freighter and found a second family in New York's rampageous art bohemia. He subsisted on ketchup and booze, and broke through around 1950 with dazzling abstract expressionist canvases inspired by what was in the air: cubism, surrealism, jazz, and film noir. The careerist thing to do would've been to ride the Ab Ex tsunami, but de Kooning stubbornly defied purist abstraction with the startlingly quasi-figurative Woman paintings. Stevens and Swan artfully show how much went into these notorious works. De Kooning's Woman is "part vamp, part tramp," a Hollywood pinup girl

with push-up bazooms, a dirty joke and a scary goddess based on a Mexican deity to whom hearts were sacrificed. She is also part Mom and part Elaine de Kooning, his artist/muse wife, and the numberless women he juggled.

He called himself a "slipping glimpser," and this book helps us see what he saw. Nobody has ever made de Kooning's slippery meanings and painstaking techniques clearer, in every phase, even the mysterious late paintings evincing the artist's advancing Alzheimer's-like illness. Now I finally get what essentially distinguished de Kooning from his rivalrous pals Gorky and Pollock, and more. I also know what de Kooning was like in bed (loud), how he managed to cheat on five steady lovers at a time (different doorbell codes), why he slept drunk in gutters even after he got rich, and how deeply he loved and how coldly he used women. Stevens and Swan manage to do what no dame ever did: they pin down his oblique soul. --Tim Appelo
Mark Stevens is the art critic for New York magazine. He has also been the art critic for The New Republic and Newsweek and has written for such publications as Vanity Fair, the New York Times, and The New Yorker. He lives in New York City.

Annalyn Swan has been a writer at Time and an award-winning music critic and senior arts editor at Newsweek. She has written for The New Republic, The Atlantic Monthly, and New York magazine. She lives in New York City.

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