

ABOUT BARNETT NEWMAN

Barnett Newman suffered years of neglect and rejection before his art became influential. The artist's wry response to his many opponents among critics and art historians was reflected in his famous remark on aesthetics: "Aesthetics is for the artist as ornithology is for the birds." It wasn't until the 1960s, when Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, and other artists began to articulate the meaning that Newman's work provided for their generation, that he finally won wide acceptance as one of the 20th century's leading modernists.

Born on the Lower East Side of Manhattan to Russian-Jewish immigrants, Barnett Newman (1905-1970) lived his entire life in New York City. He studied at the Art Students League and majored in philosophy at the City College of New York. After graduation he spent many years helping to manage his father's clothing business and teaching in public schools. In the 1930s he painted little, but stayed involved in art and even ran unsuccessfully for mayor against Fiorello LaGuardia on a program advocating better arts education and more cultural resources in New York. By the mid-1940s his wife Annalee's teaching salary and steadfast support freed him from his business obligations and enabled him to devote his energies entirely to art. While Newman's earliest extant works are abstract renderings on the theme of creation, in the aftermath of World War II the look of his paintings changed. Jeremy Lewison, Tate Director of Collections and contributing curator to the exhibition, calls this departure "a search for a way in which to express the human predicament in a post-Holocaust era."

In 1950, at the age of 45, Newman received his first solo exhibition, which opened to mixed reviews at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York. His work was slow to win adherents outside the small circle that included fellow artists Jackson Pollock and Tony Smith. Throughout the mid-1950s, the heyday of the movement that would become known as Abstract Expressionism, Newman did not exhibit any work, and in 1956 and 1957 he ceased painting altogether. Among critics, only Clement Greenberg was an early

supporter, taking the position that Newman was “a very important and original artist” and organizing a groundbreaking exhibition of his work at Bennington College, Vermont, in 1958. In 1966, the first museum exhibition of Newman’s work opened at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, presenting his now famous series, *The Stations of the Cross*. Again Newman was plunged into controversy, as viewers found it difficult to reconcile his absolutely abstract canvases with an explicit liturgical theme. But by the end of his life the reductive structure and the emotional reticence of his painting made him a hero to a younger generation of minimal and conceptual artists. In the decades since his death in 1970, the integrity and profundity of Newman’s work, as well as its formal audacity, have become ever more meaningful.

By the time of his death, Newman had already begun planning for the first comprehensive exhibition of his work. Organized by Thomas Hess, it would open the following year at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and travel to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, the Grand Palais, Paris, and the Tate Gallery, London. *Barnett Newman*, the current exhibition debuting in Philadelphia and traveling to Tate Modern, is the first full retrospective since 1971.

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