

# Disappearing Masterpieces

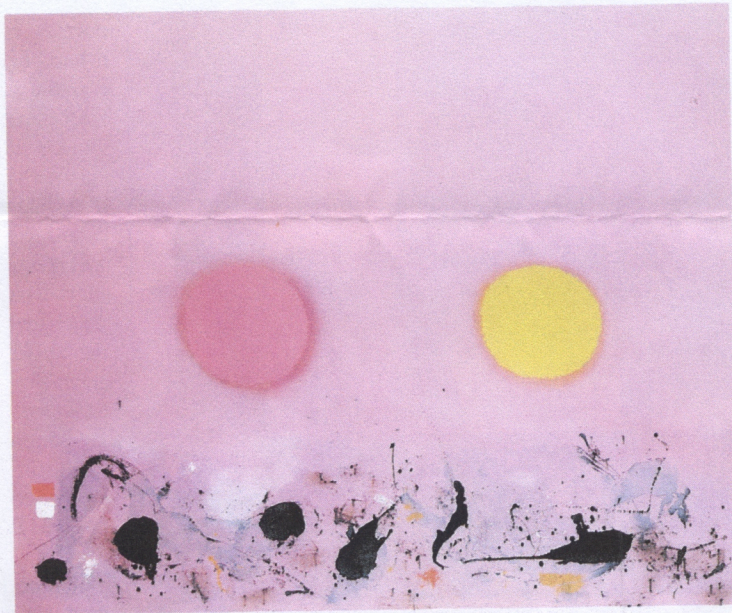
Artist & Critic Andrew Hudson Asks: Why Are These Works in Storage?

Three modern paintings that I passionately admire as great masterpieces have been taken down off the walls at the Hirshhorn Museum and the National Gallery, and I see this as symptomatic of a decline in the overall tone of the contemporary collections at both museums. I now enjoy my visits to these museums much less, and I am sad that I can no longer point out these three works (one of them made in Washington) to my students as examples of great painting.

The most recent one to disappear off the walls is Adolph Gottlieb's *Two Discs* (1963) from the Hirshhorn Museum. I first saw this painting when I was reviewing Gottlieb's 1968 retrospective exhibition at the Whitney. It struck me then as one of his finest works, and when it was afterwards announced that Mr. Hirshhorn was giving his collection to Washington, I was thrilled because this meant that *Two Discs* would come here.

Seeing it in storage at the museum (I never thought the day would dawn when it was no longer hanging on show), my immediate reaction confirmed for me that its position in the collection is akin to that of Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party* at the Phillips. *Two Discs* is a similar masterpiece: an expression of vital, human life on a grand scale.

For me, Gottlieb is the Matisse of his generation, and I think we could profitably compare his *Two Discs* with Matisse's *Studio Quai St. Michel* of 1916 at the Phillips. The *pentimenti*—evidence left behind of alterations—reveal in both paintings the astute intuition of a master artist at work. In *Two Discs* Gottlieb has changed the color of the righthand disc from orange to yellow



ADOLPH GOTTLIEB, *Two Discs*, 1963, gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1966



JULES OLITSKI, *Greek Princess*, 1976, acrylic on canvas purchased from M. Knoedler & Co., Inc. 1976

ocher, to create a more dynamic reverberation, and he has completely redrawn the black splotches and trailing lines below, adding various touches of white, red, and red-orange. Probably the two small rectangles at lower left—so like the “chop” mark of an Oriental painter or calligrapher—came at the very end, to tighten and clinch the total composition. And what a marvel this is! The masterful placement of all the elements, particularly the syncopated, off-balance positioning of the two discs slightly below and to the right of center, brings the entire pink expanse of *Two Discs* to life.

While three smaller, earlier paintings by Gottlieb are on show at the Hirshhorn, without *Two Discs* we are given a less accurate view of the achievement of this artist, still vastly underestimated by the art world. For me, it's as though the National Gallery curators said, “We don't need to show all these paintings by Rubens—let's take down *Daniel in the Lions' Den!*”

A painting approximately the same size as *Daniel in the Lions' Den*, and worthy to hang in the same room with it, disappeared from the Hirshhorn's walls over a year ago. I used to enjoy the installation of Jules Olitski's *Greek Princess* (1976) because the way it just

quietly hung there, calmly awaiting the viewer's interest, showed up so well the crass, noisy clamor and superficiality of the giant, three-dimensional Frank Stella on the next wall. The subtly inflected gray-brown transparencies of the ground of *Greek Princess*, its small nuances—a scratch (of the artist's finger?) here, a splatter of paint there—and its dividing and bordering line that changes from pink to white to blue to orange,

continued on p. 78  
MAY/JUNE 1988 63



## IN MY OPINION

continued from p. 62

in a sense resist the viewer, make the viewer come to them on their own terms, just as the rounded, hidden planes of Olitski's sculpture *Greenberg Variations* (1974) do, outside on the museum's plaza.

Subtlety and nuance are sadly lacking in the continuing reinstallation at the Hirshhorn, with its reliance on what I call the twins syndrome. Jackson Pollock's *Water Figure* (1945) has been hung next to Hans Hofmann's *Trophy* (1951), presumably because the drawing in both paintings is similar. The result is that these two fine paintings detract from each other, kill each other off. Still worse is the hanging of Pollock's *Number 3, 1949* next to Mark Tobey's *White World* (1969). Here, two paintings the same size are presented behind a guardrail as though two animals of the same species behind bars at the zoo. The truth is quite otherwise: the Pollock is an excellent work by a great artist at the height of his powers, while the Tobey, with its persnickety little brushstrokes, belongs in an altogether different league. The hanging is unfair and unkind to both.

One of the secrets of installations is to hang *opposites* together so that they bring each other out. The Hirshhorn did this successfully when it hung the "Stripe" paintings in last May's Morris Louis retrospective (which first opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York). Horizontal and vertical, wide and narrow paintings were mixed together in a treatment much more sympathetic to the individual works than the tedious, deadening, regimented way they hung at MOMA.

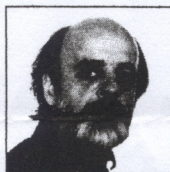
This brings me to the third painting I am missing in our museums: Louis's *Beta Kappa* (1961), an "Unfurled" painting owned by the National Gallery. To me, *Beta Kappa* is the only mid-20th-century painting at the National Gallery that can hold its own against Jackson Pollock's great *Lavender Mist* (1950) and is, like it, one of the pillars of the collection. When *Beta Kappa* left for the Louis retrospective, there was a distinct drop in the artistic level of the gallery's furthestmost contemporary room. For me, this was on the order of what would be felt if Leonardo's superlative *Ginevra de' Benci* suddenly left the West Building's small octagonal room of 15th-century Florentine portraits. I find it hard to conceive that *Beta Kappa* has languished in inaccessible storage since its return, instead of being hung once more on the National Gallery's walls. ■

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works on paper will be shown at Brody's Gallery, May 5-28.—photo by Alan Levinson