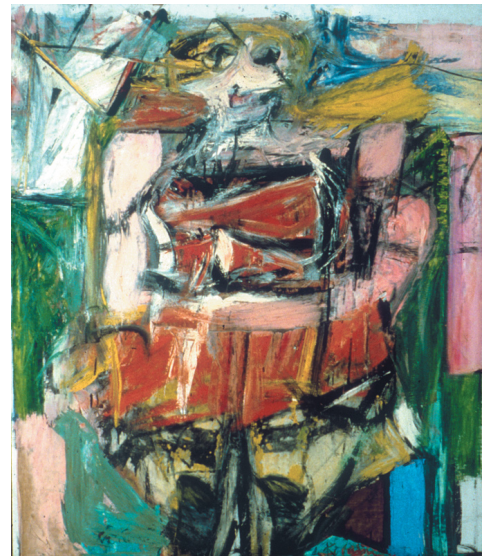


# the warhol: resources & lessons

## Artists Past & Present: Willem de Kooning

One of the most prolific and dynamic painters to emerge from the 1940s New York City art scene, Willem de Kooning was born in the Netherlands in 1904 and emigrated to the U.S. in 1926. While de Kooning was not an Abstract Expressionist in the strictest sense, some of his mature paintings like *Excavation*, made in 1950, share many of the movement's traits, including aggressive brushwork and abstract imagery. He incorporated Surrealism's love of free association with some of the spatial qualities of Analytic Cubism to create paintings of astonishing complexity. In 1938, he began his first Women series of paintings, which he would revisit throughout his career. They serve as his most iconic work. *Woman VI* from 1953 is the last in the series and perhaps the most abstracted. The female figure is rendered in garish pinks, reds, and whites with the eyes and mouth emphasized and given an almost savage treatment. The Women series draws not only from the aforementioned 20th-century influences, but also from ancient art like the cave paintings of Lascaux and the Venus of Willendorf sculpture. These paintings were not only shocking for their perceived hostility towards women, which is subject to debate, but also because de Kooning focused on the human figure at a time when art world dogma praised abstraction almost exclusively.



Willem de Kooning, *Woman VI*, 1953  
Oil on Canvas, 36 x 46 1/4 in. Gift of G. David  
Thompson (55.24.4)  
The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh

Yet, his work did become more abstract during the 1960s up until his death in 1997 at the age of 93. He continued painting after developing Alzheimer's disease in the 1980s. Many works created during this last period of his life maintain the lyrical qualities of his earlier work, but they also display a calmness previously unseen in his canvases. When seen as a whole, de Kooning's body of work is one of the most fascinating and arresting in 20th-century American art.

*"That ferocious woman he painted didn't come from living with me. It began when he was three years old."*

- Elaine de Kooning, Willem's wife, on the Women series

### Sources:

Fionna Barber, "De Kooning's Women and the Performance of Femininity" *Make, the Magazine of Women's Art* 77 (September/November 1997): 14-18.

Robert Rosenblum, *On Modern American Art: Selected Essays* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999).

Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan. *De Kooning: An American Master* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 2004)

### Links:

Site contains another image and information from the Women series:

<http://www.nelson-atkins.org/collections/20thcent/detail/woman.htm>

Image gallery containing famous works of de Kooning, such as *Excavation*:

<http://www.usc.edu/schools/annenberg/asc/projects/comm544/library/artists/DeKooningWillem.html>

### Comprehension Questions:

1. If this woman could talk, what would she say? Explain your response with elements you see in the work.
2. What elements in *Woman VI* may have led people to perceive this work as hostile towards women?
3. Would you consider this painting to be a portrait? Does it tell us more about the woman the artist depicted or the artist himself?
4. Describe how women are portrayed in art and popular culture today.

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Artists Past & Present: Willem de Kooning



Willem de Kooning

*Woman VI*, 1953

Oil on Canvas

36 x 46 1/4 in.

Gift of G. David Thompson (55.24.4)

The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh