

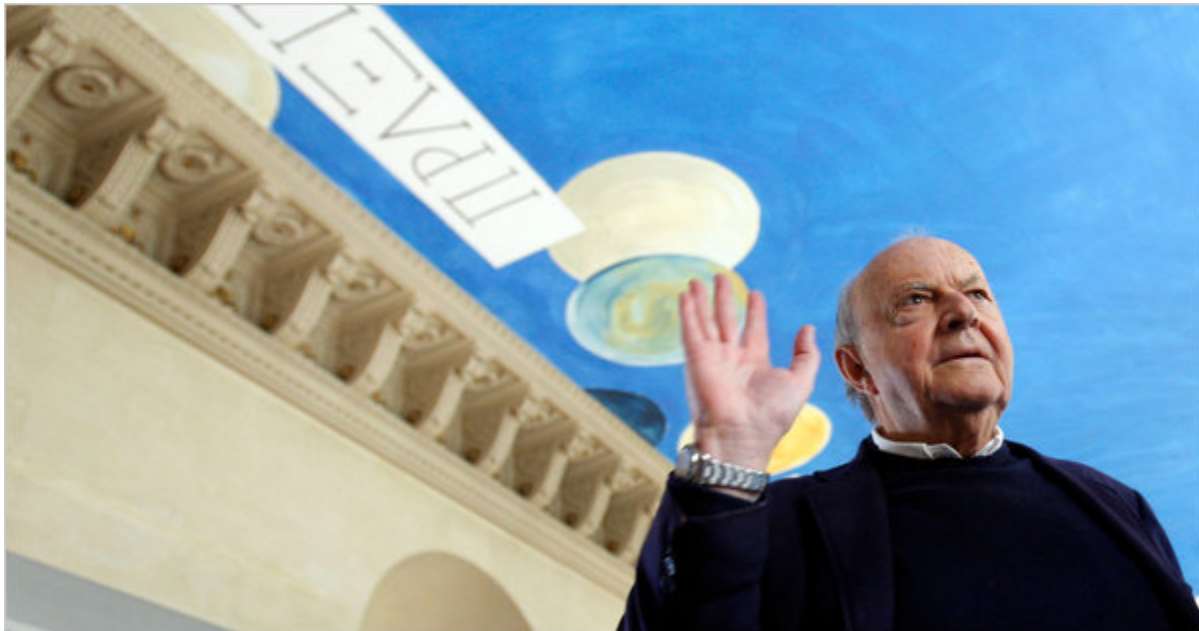
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An Artist of Selective Abandon



Cy Twombly with his 3,750-square-foot ceiling painting at the Louvre, commissioned for the Salle des Bronzes

By ROBERTA SMITH

With the death on Tuesday in Rome of Cy Twombly at the age of 83, postwar American painting has lost a towering and inspirational talent. Although he tended to be overshadowed by two of his closest colleagues — Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns — Mr. Twombly played an equally significant role in opening pathways beyond the high-minded purity and frequent machismo of Abstract Expressionism, the dominant painting style in the late 1940s and '50s, when the three men entered the New York art world.

In different ways each artist countered the Olympian loftiness of the Abstract Expressionists by stressing the loquacious, cosmopolitan nature of art and its connectedness not only to other forms of culture but also to the volatile machinations of the human mind and to lived experience. Rauschenberg's art functioned as a kind of sieve in which he caught and brilliantly composed the chaotic flood of existing objects or images that the world offered. Mr. Johns, always more cerebral and introspective, isolated individual motifs like targets and flags, mystifying their familiarity with finely calibrated brushwork and collage. His methodical approach to art making helped set the stage for Conceptual Art and influenced generations of artists.

Mr. Twombly worked with a combination of abandon and selectivity that split the difference between his two friends. His work was in many ways infinitely more basic, even primitive, in its emphasis on direct

old-fashioned mark making, except that his feverish scribbles and calligraphic scrawls made that process seem new and electric. And part of that electricity came from his ecstatic response to history, literature and other art, and the raw emotionalism that his mark making conveyed.

His rough, improvised surfaces almost invariably conveyed a startling openness and vulnerability. Whether graffitilike sex organs and orifices or blackboard-style diagrams, his scribbles felt inordinately exposed, and even unhinged, and almost suspended in midair. Interviewed by the art historian and curator Kirk Varnedoe, who organized a retrospective of Mr. Twombly's work at the Museum of Modern Art in 1994-95, the artist referred to an "irresponsibility of gravity" as central to his art.

But as abrupt and even violent as his individual works could feel, Mr. Twombly was in many ways an artist of continuity. His raw mark making could be seen as Surrealist automatism pushed to unprecedented extremes. His titles — "Vengeance of Achilles," "Leda and the Swan," "Night Watch," "School of Athens," "Thermopylae," "Lepanto" — asserted again and again that no part of culture was so old that it could not inspire new art. Living most of his adult life in Italy and building so explicitly on the achievements of "old Europe" in his work, he thoroughly blurred the divide between American and European art that many critics and art historians liked to cultivate.

Mr. Twombly even maintained continuities where Abstract Expressionism was concerned. Arguably the crux of his achievement was not so much to overturn the style as to subvert it from within. Although the Abstract Expressionists liked to believe, in the words of Barnett Newman, that "we are making it out of ourselves," Mr. Twombly in some ways beat them at their own game.

In his early works this occurred on an almost purely physiological level. In the immense white-on-black "Panorama" of 1955, in which he clearly had one eye on Jackson Pollock's skeins of dripped paint, Mr. Twombly's scattered, skittering thatches of chalk lines seemed like extensions of his own nervous system. Accruing randomly, like isolated thoughts or asides, they refused to imply any grand scheme or overreaching rhythm, which contributed to their psychological intimacy.

Soon after, his paintings began to negotiate strange truces between art and literature, painting and drawing (or handwriting), and looking and deciphering — often with ravishingly beautiful results. He redefined painting as an essentially glyphic, storytelling art, in which spontaneous marks almost always did double duty as signs, symbols, letters and notations, and some sense of a narrative often hovered in the background, even if it was simply about the process of making the painting.

As attested by works like "Panorama," which was over 11 feet across, and "The Age of Alexander," a 16-foot-wide canvas that he made over the course of several hours on New Year's Eve 1959 (in an emotional celebration of the recent birth of his son, Cyrus Alessandro), Mr. Twombly was fearless about spreading his often delicate notational episodes and graphic outbursts across vast surfaces. But as he aged, his work did become more full-bodied and painterly, if no less basic. (He often smeared paint with his hands.)

The scale of his drawing also increased, culminating in the enormous red spirals of his "Bacchus" paintings, whose larger-than-life cursive bore down on the viewer from all four walls of a sky-lighted space at the Gagosian Gallery in New York. That series, made and exhibited in 2005, was in many ways his parting bow to Abstract Expressionism.

Perhaps the most important continuity that Mr. Twombly cultivated was that between artwork and viewer. His art revealed an enthralling calligraphic and diagrammatic universe teeming with meaning. His ultimate subject was nothing less than the human longing to communicate — to make meaning that others could apprehend and expand. It is an ancient loop, but in nearly everything he did Mr. Twombly exposed its wiring with a new clarity and exultant intensity. Few 20th-century artists corroborated as insistently Schiller's assertion that "all art is dedicated to joy."