

DOMINIQUE LÉVY

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CELEBRATING THE CENTENARY OF THE ARTIST'S BIRTH, DOMINIQUE LÉVY WILL REVISIT ROBERT MOTHERWELL'S *ELEGIES TO THE SPANISH REPUBLIC*

Robert Motherwell: Elegy to the Spanish Republic

November 4, 2015 – January 9, 2016

Dominique Lévy

909 Madison Avenue

New York City

New York, NY—Dominique Lévy is pleased to present *Robert Motherwell: Elegy to the Spanish Republic*, the first gallery exhibition in over twenty years to offer a fresh survey of the monumental series that marked a pivotal moment in the history of modern art. Begun in 1948, Motherwell's *Elegies* were intended as public laments, deeply political in their condemnation of the violence of the Spanish Civil War and the isolationist fascism of General Francisco Franco. The artist also described them as "general metaphors of the contrast between life and death, and their interrelation." Returning again and again to this central preoccupation of his *oeuvre* over the course of decades, Motherwell would ultimately create more than 250 paintings and works on paper exploring the subject. The last work in the series, titled *Mourning Elegy*, was completed only months before his death in 1991. In their implicit references to politics, psychology, literature, and poetry, the *Elegies* constructed a bridge between Surrealism and the new style of painting emerging at the same time: Abstract Expressionism.

Robert Motherwell: Elegy to the Spanish Republic celebrates the centenary of the artist's birth and fills Dominique Lévy Gallery with eighteen works spanning the years 1954-1989. These range from such small-scale studies as *Mural Sketch (Study for Elegy to the Spanish Republic 100)* and *Study for State II "Elegy No. 100,"* both of which were made in advance of one of the artist's largest paintings, to such monumental canvases as *Elegy*



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for the Spanish Republic XXXV (Elegy to the Spanish Republic No. 35), which measures over six by eight feet. Works on view include loans from major museums, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Philadelphia Museum of Art; and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institute, Washington D.C.

In conjunction with *Robert Motherwell: Elegy to the Spanish Republic*, Dominique Lévy has published a fully illustrated catalogue, featuring a text by David Anfam, noted scholar of Abstract Expressionism, and an essay by poet and art critic John Yau. This book explores the inextricable links between poetry, politics, writing, and painting that are revealed in the history of the Elegies. It includes Harold Rosenberg's "A Bird for Every Bird"; Federico García Lorca's "Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías"; notes and writings by Robert Motherwell on the Spanish Civil War and the Elegies; and rare archival material.



About the Elegies and the Exhibition

Robert Motherwell was a twenty-one year old student at Stanford University studying Surrealism and philosophy when the Spanish Civil War erupted in 1936. He was introduced to the tragic reality of that conflict at a café in San Francisco in the spring of 1937, when he heard the French writer and theorist André Malraux passionately speaking in defense of the Republican armies in Spain. The young Motherwell was struck by Malraux's account of the war, in which the first air-raid bombings of civilians in history were carried out and more than 700,000 people were killed in battle. The artist would later reflect that the war was the most "moving political event" of his early life, teaching him that "the world could, after all, regress." This realization affected him profoundly and, inspired by Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé's injunction to "paint, not the thing, but the effect it provides," Motherwell began pondering ways to respond to the tragedy of the war in visual terms.

It was more than a decade later that Motherwell began work on his *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*. The very first work in this series was a small pen-and-ink drawing

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made in 1948 to accompany his friend Harold Rosenberg's poem "A Bird for Every Bird," slated for publication in the second edition of their arts and literature journal *possibilities*. Rosenberg and Motherwell ultimately abandoned that second issue—and the drawing along with it. Later that year, the artist returned to his drawing and enlarged its image. He titled the new work *At Five in the Afternoon*, referencing the poem by Spanish revolutionary and writer García Lorca titled "Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejía." Thus, an elegy for the famed bullfighter whose goring and death Lorca viewed as a metaphor for the greater violence of the Civil War gave birth to the *Elegies*.

By connecting his early *Elegies* to García Lorca, Motherwell also linked his works to Symbolism, in effect announcing their emotive ties to something beyond painting itself. Of the content of these paintings, he wrote, "I wanted a painting as clear and personal and unarchitectonic as a human voice, which is to say, a spontaneous work that sang, even though a solemn song... An elegiac tone... The voice of silence, even." With its



recurring intonation "A las cinco de la tarde, A las cinco de la tarde," García Lorca's poem expands the scope of the elegiac form, capturing the rhythm of the death knell. It is this repetitive power of the elegy that Motherwell sought to translate into a visual language of his own in the *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*. Translating the tolling of the poem's death knell into large-scale abstracted figures, the painter implores us to consider the limit between progress and regression in our own time. Though the *Elegies* on view at Dominique Lévy – and across Motherwell's entire series of 250 works - repeat the same basic forms of pendulous orbs and adjoining stripes of rich black, there is significant variety. Contours and shapes change and multiply, and colors appear in unexpected bursts, revealing the depth and profundity of Motherwell's commitment to his theme over time.

Though often associated first with the emergence of Abstract Expressionism, Motherwell's *Elegies* are firmly situated within the lineage of *Guernica* (1937), Picasso's mural-sized masterpiece painted in grays and blacks, condemning the carnage wrought by Franco's bombing of the Spanish city in collaboration with German forces. Attracted to the "strong, bright, intense, unmixed colors" of Picasso's peers Miró and Calder, Motherwell sought to develop a way in which to incorporate such hues into a Modernism that had seen "authoritarianism, bureaucracy, holocausts, nuclear terror, pollution, waste..." After these horrors, he

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declared, “bright color no longer represents social reality but human aspirations... as Gothic stained glass at the time of the Black Death.” Motherwell’s heavy blots of black constitute a call to arms, responsibility, and public mourning. In their reliance upon powerful abstraction and somber palette, the Elegies extend that process of mourning beyond the Spanish Republic to a wider and more global realm. As Motherwell once observed, “The Elegies reflect the internationalist in me, interested in the historical forces of the twentieth century, with strong feelings about the conflicting forces in it.”

About the artist

Robert Motherwell was born January 24, 1915, in Aberdeen, Washington. He was awarded a fellowship to the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles at age 11, and in 1932 studied painting briefly at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco. Motherwell received a B.A. from Stanford University in 1937 and enrolled for graduate work later that year in the Department of Philosophy at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He traveled to Europe in 1938 for a year of study abroad. His first solo exhibition was presented at the Raymond Duncan Gallery in Paris in 1939.

In September of 1940, Motherwell settled in New York, where he entered Columbia University to study art history with Meyer Schapiro, who encouraged him to become a painter. In 1941, Motherwell traveled to Mexico with Roberto Matta for six months. After returning to New York, his circle came to include William Baziotis, Willem de Kooning, Hans Hofmann, and Jackson Pollock. In 1942, Motherwell was included in the exhibition *First Papers of Surrealism* at the Whitelaw Reid Mansion, New York. In 1944, Motherwell became editor of the Documents of Modern Art series of books, and he contributed frequently to the literature on Modern art from that time.

A solo exhibition of Motherwell’s work was held at Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century gallery, New York, in 1944. In 1946, he began to associate with Herbert Ferber, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko, and spent his first summer in East Hampton, Long Island. This year, Motherwell was given solo exhibitions at the Arts Club of Chicago and the San Francisco Museum of Art, and he participated in *Fourteen Americans* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The artist subsequently taught and lectured throughout the United States, and continued to exhibit extensively in the United States and abroad. A Motherwell exhibition took place at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, the Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts, Vienna, and the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1976–77. He was given important solo exhibitions at the Royal Academy, London, and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., in 1978. A retrospective of his works organized by the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, traveled in the United States from 1983 to 1985. From 1971, the artist lived and worked in Greenwich, Connecticut. He died July 16, 1991, in Cape Cod, Massachusetts.

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Robert Motherwell

Elegy to the Spanish Republic No. 130, 1974-75

Acrylic on canvas

96 x 119 3/4 inches (243.8 x 304.1 cm)

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Robert Motherwell

Elegy Study No. XIII, 1976-1979

Acrylic on canvas mounted on board

24 x 48 inches (61 x 121.9 cm)

Collection of Blema and Arnold Steinberg, Montreal

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Robert Motherwell

The Figure 4 on an Elegy, 1960

22 7/8 x 28 3/4 inches (58.1 x 73 cm)

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