

## FINANCIAL TIMES

## ARTS

*The 'Americans in Paris' show at New York's Grey Art Museum adds nuance to the story of how modern art evolved, writes Ariella Budick*

The classic story of modern art goes like this: there once was a city called Paris, where the world's most brilliant artists converged, jostling and mingling into an international avant-garde. Then Hitler's armies invaded, and everybody left. André Breton, Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Fernand Léger, Piet Mondrian and many other luminaries decamped to America so that, by the time the war ended, New York had become the new capital of art.

That narrative isn't wrong, exactly, but it lacks nuance. Paris in the 1950s was far from dead. Many transplants headed right back there as soon as it was liberated. Demobbed Allied soldiers already in Europe made a beeline for Saint-Germain. American expatriates, so long shut out of the Continent, flowed in, finding the cost of living manageable and the city's lure unextinguished. Some infiltrated Parisian ateliers and insinuated themselves at café tables alongside Sartre and de Beauvoir.

*Americans in Paris*, at the Grey Art Museum's airy new space on Cooper Square, evokes those days of cheap wine, curling cigarette smoke and the scent of postwar freedom. New York, despite its dynamism, had become an artistic tyranny, where Abstract Expressionist orthodoxies were proclaimed and enforced by the inquisitorial critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg. Even the tiniest hint of figuration brought down accusations of apostasy; Willem de Kooning came in for a critical drubbing when he displayed his series of recognisable "Women".

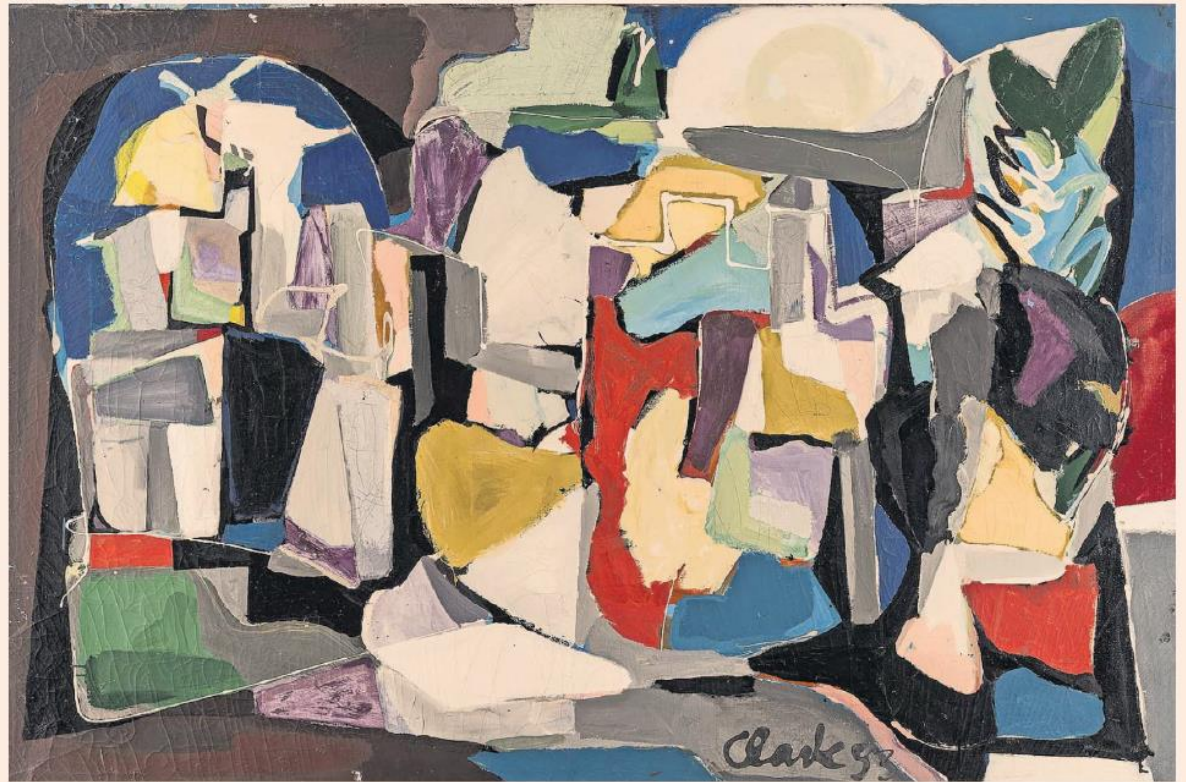
The arbiters' jurisdiction didn't extend across the Atlantic, though, so renegades such as Ellsworth Kelly and Joan Mitchell found Paris a comfortable refuge from which to defy the rules. Besides trailing after the big names, the show also introduces us to painters and sculptors who couldn't locate a niche in the art world back home. Some still haven't found their way into the canon.

Ed Clark, for instance, studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago on the GI Bill, but went looking overseas for

respite from racism (at least the American kind). His magnificent painting "The City" (1953) harmonises sonorous colours and blaring lights with a sense of graceful chaos. Clark accents abstract gestures with cameos of representation; you can pick out storefronts, posters, neon lights and advertisements amid the general ruckus. The painting melds assiduous scrutiny with the emotional experience of urban life. (Years after selling the work, Clark belatedly

recognised its significance and managed to buy it back for his daughter.)

That infusion of observation with feeling had a fine French pedigree. Monet distilled it in his late waterlilies, painted at Giverny. Joan Mitchell, who visited France for the first time in 1948 and then lived there for decades, also married close study of nature with a roiling interior landscape, channelling views of her garden into lively vegetal abstractions.



Ed Clark's "The City" (1952) — Collection of Melana Clark, Boston, courtesy Hausor and Wirth and estate of Ed Clark

## Scenes of postwar American freedom

Two untitled Mitchells, both from 1960, are spectacularly subdued, with greens, greys and blues that conjure up snow-dusted evergreens or vernal pools where migrating birds might rest their wings.

Even thousands of miles away from the Midtown galleries, Mitchell had to suffer the sting of New York prejudice. When Greenberg attended her first (and last) solo show at Galerie Neufville in Paris, he immediately advised its director to “get rid of that gestural horror!” The disdain stuck: Mitchell spent most of her career being ignored. Only recently has she achieved a modicum of justified (posthumous) recognition.

She was joined in oblivion by Shirley Jaffe, whose untitled 1954 canvas looks like a city seen through a break in the clouds by a myopic bird. Jaffe died at 92 in 2016, her gifts evident but still largely unacknowledged.

To some transplants, Paris offered a first flourishing as the artists they had always wanted to be; for others, the more established, it represented a chance to moult and change. When Beauford Delaney got there in 1953, he was known for realistic, Harlem Renaissance-style portraits of WEB Du Bois, Duke Ellington and, most essentially, James Baldwin.

He had painted a teenaged Baldwin as an Apollonian nude in “Dark Rapture” (which is not in the show), and they both abandoned Greenwich Village for Paris to escape racism and homophobia.

Delaney radically transformed his style, roving in lucent fields of colour. “Untitled” (1961) and “Blue-Light Abstraction” (c1962) lyrically evoke a sky glimpsed through shimmering leaves and swaying branches. Like Mitchell and Jaffe (and Monet), Delaney



Left: Shirley Jaffe's "Untitled" (1954). Right: Leon Golub's "Head II" (1959)  
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immersed himself in the natural world, filtering his perceptions through a painterly veil.

Leon Golub and his wife Nancy Spero saw that their proclivity for portraying people, which made them pariahs in the US, wouldn't alarm the French. They moved in 1959 and found an environment receptive enough to nurture some of their finest figurative work.

Golub's painting "Torso, III" (1960) descends from ancient Greece, expressing his belief that the violent catharsis of Hellenistic sculpture resonated with the 20th century's brutal conflicts. The headless, armless and partially legless body parades the horrors of war, but its lacquered golden texture offers decorative redemption.

Being away from his native country didn't mean Golub was forgotten: MoMA included him in the 1959 show *New Images of Man*, and even though New York critics savaged his contribution, the museum wisely acquired "Torso, III".

Spero, too, cultivated an attitude of glamorous anger. Three white, winged figures with faces like foetal cherubs whirl out of the darkness, bearing the title's oracular message: "Les Anges, Merde, Fuck You." Heaven is out to get

The magnificent painting "The City" harmonises sonorous colours with graceful chaos

us. In one sense, this is a despairing answer to the question Spero posed to herself: "What can one do as an artist when you see all the violence being carried out in the world?"

Perhaps there's another subtext, too. Golub and Spero were raising three young sons in Paris, and any parent can imagine how frustrating it must have been to do on a crimped budget in a foreign country while they were both trying to work. It certainly wasn't all late-night pow-wows at the Café de Flore. The painting distils the dark side of life abroad, far from home and family, full of nightmarish fantasies of demon children and the ceaseless clash of tenderness and rage.

To July 20, [greyartgallery.nyu.edu](http://greyartgallery.nyu.edu)