



Chaim Soutine / Willem de Kooning

Paint Made Flesh

Chaim Soutine,
The Hill of Céret, detail, 1921,
oil on canvas
Los Angeles, LACMA

15 September 2021 – 10 January 2022
Musée de l'Orangerie

After seeing Soutine's work in the 1930s, at the MoMA in 1950, and at the Barnes Foundation in June 1952, Willem de Kooning developed a distinctive form of expressionism straddling figurative and abstract art.

This dialogue between two iconic figures of the School of Paris and New York is the theme of this exhibition organised by two partner institutions with the finest groups of works by Soutine – the Barnes Foundation and the Musée de l'Orangerie. It traces de Kooning's journey from the early Ingresque portraits in the 1940s, to the turning point in the 1950s and the powerful formulation of his famous pop and archaic Woman paintings in response to Soutine's

elegiac East Hampton landscapes in the 1970s; it revolves around and begins with the core event of the Soutine retrospective in 1950.

True masterpieces, rarely seen in Paris, are brought together and set in counterpoint. This proposition ties in extremely well with recurring themes in the Musée de l'Orangerie's programming, following as it does in the wake of "Apollinaire, the Poet's Gaze" (2016), "Dada Africa" (2017), "The Water Lilies. American Abstraction and the Last Monet" (2018) or "De Chirico. Metaphysical Painting" (2020); or focusing on the reception of European art in America from Impressionism to the School of Paris.

Cécile Debray, Director of the Musée

Chronologie

1893

is born in Smilovichi
(now Belarus).

1904

Willem de Kooning
is born in Rotterdam
(the Netherlands).

1910

Soutine is offered a place
at the Vilnius Academy of
Fine Arts at his second
attempt.

1913

Soutine arrives in Paris
and attends Fernand
Cormon's classes at
the École des beaux-arts.
He moves into "La Ruche",
a group of studios at 2,
passage Dantzig in
Montparnasse.

How did de Kooning discover Soutine's work?

Claire Bernardi – Chaïm Soutine is a major figure in the School of Paris, a label which refers to a generation of painters and sculptors of all nationalities who came to live and work in Paris in the early 20th century, rather than to a movement. Soutine was widely exhibited and collected in the United States in the 1930s, due notably to two figures: Paul Guillaume – the originator of the collection at the Musée l'Orangerie – and Dr Albert C. Barnes, the creator of the foundation in Philadelphia which bears his name.

Interest in the painter in the United States remained strong until he was granted posthumous recognition in the form of a MoMA retrospective in 1950. His paintings, with their heavy impasto and highly gestural style, were presented as prefigurations of American painting of this era. Soutine was depicted in the guise of a "prophet" announcing the birth of American abstraction.

Willem de Kooning was one of the artists on whom Soutine had the most profound impact. He discovered his paintings in the 1930s, but the MoMA retrospective and a visit to the Barnes Foundation with his wife Elaine in June 1952 were seminal moments in his encounter with Soutine's artistic world. De Kooning's works in the 1960s and 1970s reveal a growing interest in the pictorial qualities which he admired in the painter.

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"Chaïm Soutine" retrospective
at MoMA from 31 October 1950
to 7 January 1951, New York,
MoMA Digital Image 2021

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Chaïm Soutine,
Self-portrait, circa 1918,
Princeton, The Henry and Rose
Pearlman Foundation

1916

The art dealer Léopold Zborowski becomes Soutine's agent and obtains exclusive rights to his work.

1917

De Kooning attends evening classes in drawing at the Rotterdam Academy of Fine Arts and Techniques.

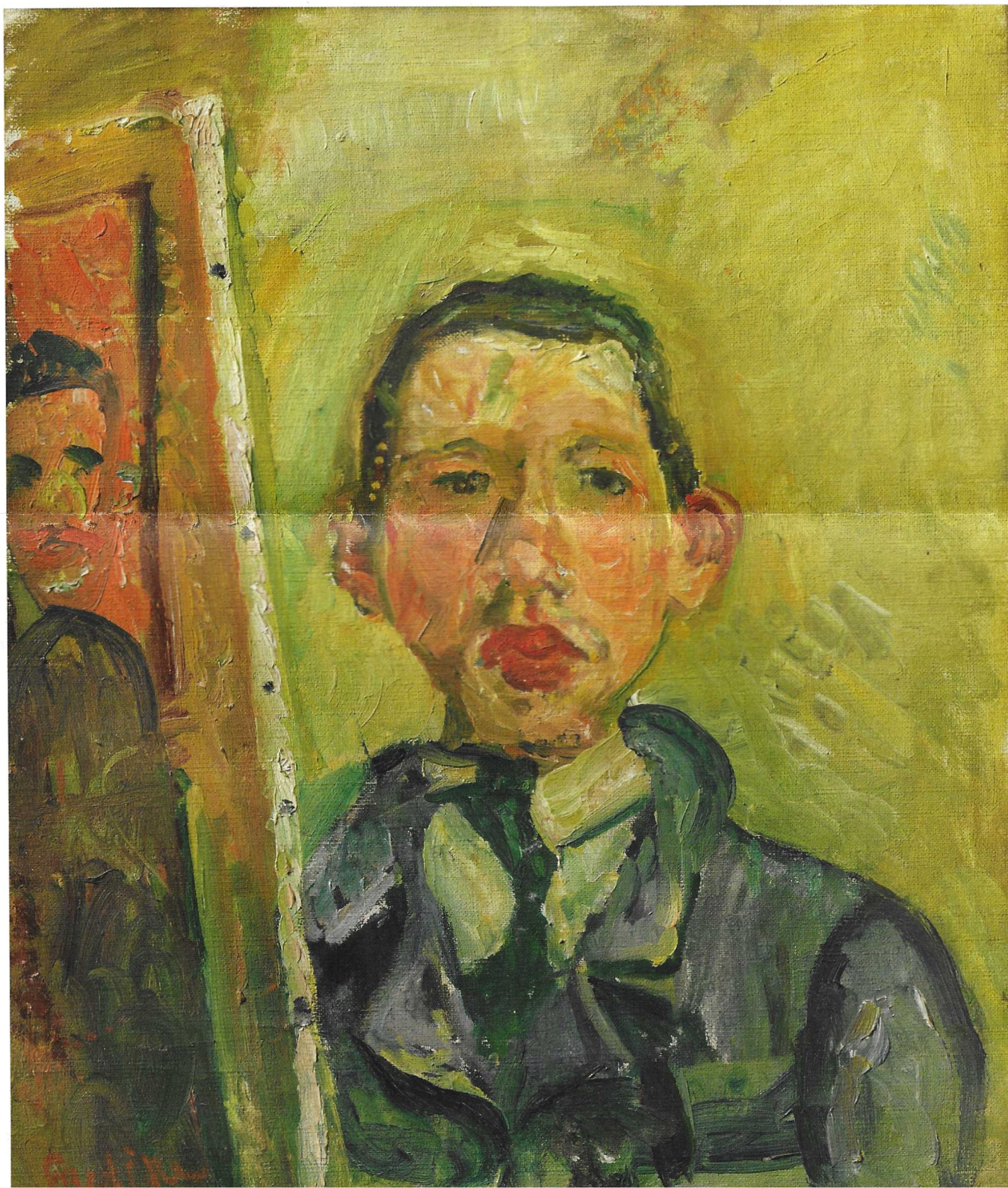
1919

Soutine withdraws to Céret in the Pyrenees for three years.

1922

The American collector Albert C. Barnes discovers Soutine's work and buys fifty-four paintings with the help of Zborowski and Paul Guillaume.

The artist's reputation is now firmly established.



1926

De Kooning stows away on a ship bound for the United States.

1927

De Kooning settles in New York. He begins working for Eastman Brothers, an interior decorating firm.

1930

De Kooning probably discovers Soutine's work for the first time at the exhibition "Painting in Paris, from American Collections" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

1943

The exhibition "A Selection of Paintings of the Twentieth Century" at the Bignou Gallery shows works by Soutine and de Kooning side by side for the first time.

In early August, Soutine has emergency surgery in Paris. He dies on 9 August.

1950

The "Challenge and Defy" exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery presents

Figurative art and/or abstraction?

Claire Bernardi –

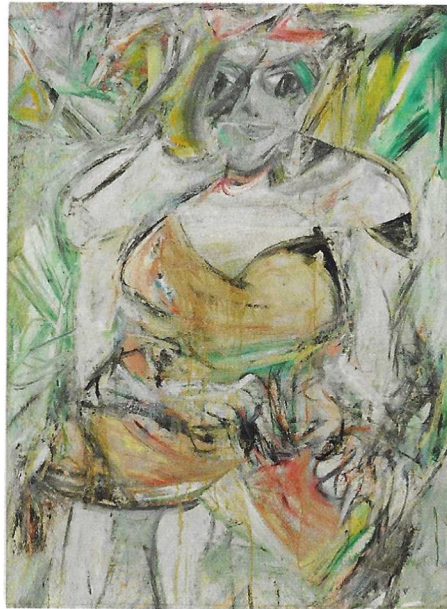
At the start of the second half of the 20th century, Willem de Kooning's career was already well established. In the space of a few decades, since arriving in New York at the age of 22, he had created an impressive body of controversial masterpieces. His position in the New York avant-garde, the "abstract expressionists" championed by a new generation of critics and exhibition curators, seemed secure, but it was not one which the artist accepted unequivocally.

As a matter of fact, de Kooning was conspicuously distancing himself from this doctrine when he painted his Woman paintings in the early 1950s. Although he had initially reconnected with figurative art in the late 1940s, these new canvas depicting fierce-looking curvaceous women who seem to erupt from an abstract background clearly demonstrated a movement in a new, more radical and violent direction. They shocked both devotees of his abstract painting and advocates of more traditional figurative painting.

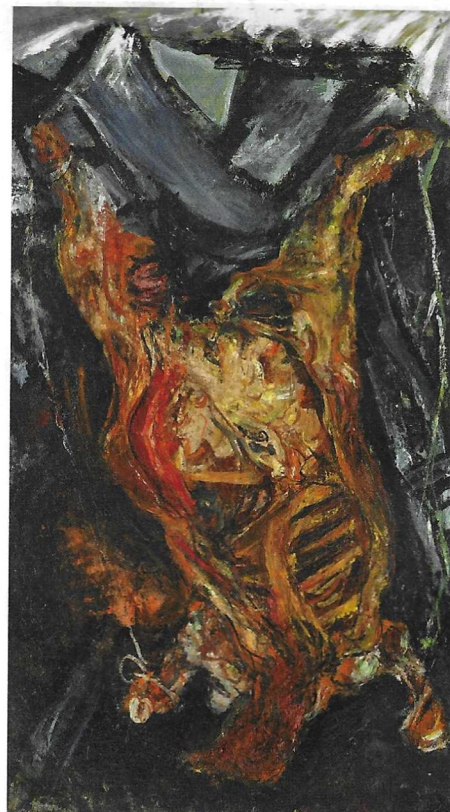
De Kooning became fully acquainted with Soutine's work at this major turning point in his painting. Although the sources of inspiration for his large Woman figures were diverse, ranging from the ancient art of the Cyclades to pin-ups in magazines, the painter appears to have admired and sought out in Soutine the alchemy which enabled him to cross the hard boundary between abstraction and figurative art.

Although this porosity was neither sought nor consciously acknowledged by Soutine, it held the key to a rereading of his work by American art critics and artists in the 1950s. The art historian Arthur Danto highlights the way in which de Kooning's perception of his predecessor encouraged his search for a "third way": "What de Kooning might have seen in Soutine was how it was possible to paint like a New York artist – with gestural slabs and strokes of thick paint – and do the figure: to be abstract and referential at once." ("Abstracting Soutine", *The Madonna of the Future: Essays in a Pluralistic Art*, New York, 2000).

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"It's really absurd to make an image, like a human image, with paint, today [...] But then all of a sudden it was even more absurd not to do it."

work by Soutine alongside works by de Kooning for the second time. The major "Soutine" retrospective opens at MoMA, before touring several American cities. It attracts unprecedented media coverage.

1952

De Kooning moves into a new studio at 88 East 10th Street. Willem and his wife Elaine visit the Barnes Foundation, where they view works by Soutine on display.

1953

De Kooning's third but first solo exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery: "Paintings on the Theme of the Woman". The exhibition is a critical rather than a commercial success.

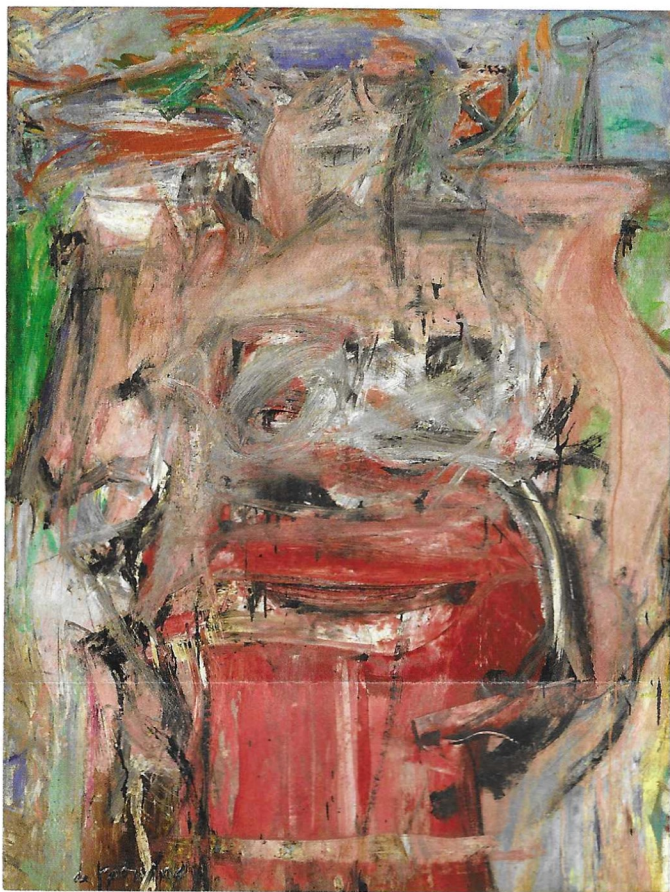
1977

De Kooning cites Soutine as a major source for his art in an interview for the journal *Quest*.

1997

On 19 March, de Kooning dies in East Hampton, aged 92.

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Willem de Kooning,
Woman II, 1952
New York, The Museum
of Modern Art

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Chaim Soutine,
Slaughtered Ox, 1925
Grenoble, Musée de Grenoble

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Willem de Kooning,
Woman as Landscape,
1954-1955
Private collection

Paint made Flesh

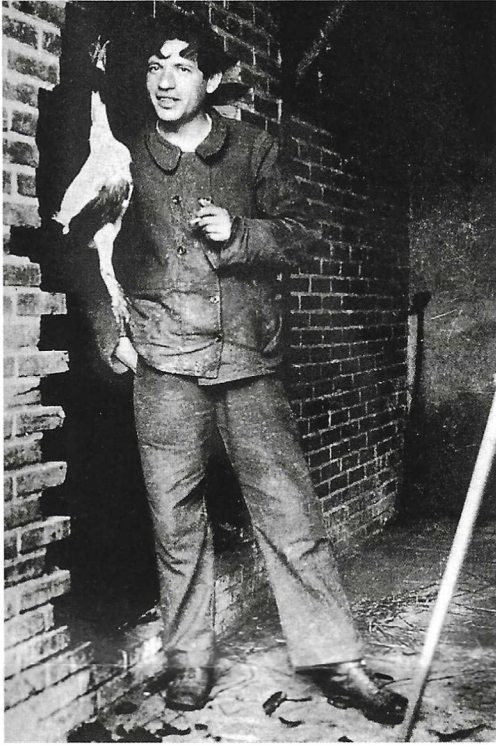
De Kooning is possibly the only artist of his generation to fully appreciate the meaning of Soutine's expressive painting. He clearly perceived that its equilibrium lay in the free use of pictorial gestures which, paradoxically, were inseparable from a strong and intimate relationship with figures.

Both artists sought the magic touch which could transform pictorial matter into a living organic subject, the "paint made flesh" described by Georges Didi-Huberman in his book *La Peinture incarnée* (Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1985) which inspired and shaped our approach to this exhibition and suggested its title. In a rereading of Balzac's short story *The Unknown Masterpiece*, starting with the "desires of the flesh" which permeate the tragedy of the main character, the painter Frenhofer, the philosopher revisits the fantasy of the colour which can potentially breathe life into a painting. By considering the works of Soutine and de Kooning from the perspective of the figure embodied through painting, as a process of creating a flesh and blood presence, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of their pictorial affinities.

"Flesh was the reason why oil paint was invented". De Kooning's famous words during a lecture delivered in New York ("Renaissance and Order", 1949) reveal the main reason behind his interest in Soutine's work: the two painters shared a love of the materiality of painting and a predilection for depicting the human figure in its corporality.

"But I've always been crazy about Soutine – all of his paintings. Maybe it's the lushness of the paint. He builds up a surface that looks like a material, like a substance. There's a kind of transfiguration, a certain fleshiness in his work."

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The act of painting

Elaine de Kooning recalls that her husband paid the highest tribute possible from one artist to another when he confided: "the more I try to be like Soutine, the more original I get". De Kooning was primarily searching for a form of relationship with painting by studying his predecessor. The American painter was equally fascinated by Soutine's work and anecdotes about his life, and even more so by his creative process.

Both artists shared an obsessional relationship with their painting tools: their brushes, which were always tidied and cleaned before use, were in stark contrast to their untidy work spaces. Another shared trait, which is critical to an understanding of their practice,

was their struggle to judge when a painting was finished. Often working from a number of drawings and collage fragments, de Kooning would fill his canvas with superimposed figures, sometimes scraping off the previous figure in order to start painting afresh. Elaine de Kooning estimates that over two hundred states preceded the final version of *Woman I*, which took two years to complete. For his part, Soutine, sometimes refused to show his recently completed paintings and destroyed a great many of them. When he retreated for three years to the little village of Céret in the Pyrénées-Orientales (1919-1922) in order to paint, he produced over two hundred works, of which only a small number have survived.

"I heard a marvelous story about Soutine, from some woman who told me about her experience with him. His place was so dirty, it stank with filth. He had a rotting carcass of a fowl he painted, but his brushes were like medical instruments. It's funny because every night I go downstairs in the cellar and clean all my brushes. Soutine did the same thing. The rest of the place was so dirty, so unkempt but the brushes...."

Gaby Rodgers, "Willem de Kooning: The Artist at 74," interview of Willem de Kooning, *Newsday*,

Online symposium

When New York looks at the School of Paris (1930-1950). Reception, rereadings and appropriations

Monday 29 and Tuesday 30 November 2021

After long decades spent asserting the “triumph” of the New York School and its autonomy, the time now appears to be ripe for a historiographic appraisal. Entire artistic movements and their circulation may have been overlooked. A new generation of historians has pooled sources from across the globe to gain a clearer understanding of this history and is initiating a review of the European art visible in the United States pre-1950 in terms of exhibitions, journals and private collections. By drawing on the career paths of individual artists, we would also like to explore the circumstances surrounding the emergence of American abstract expressionism and its relationship with the European and, more particularly, the French figurative tradition, in the specific context of World War II.

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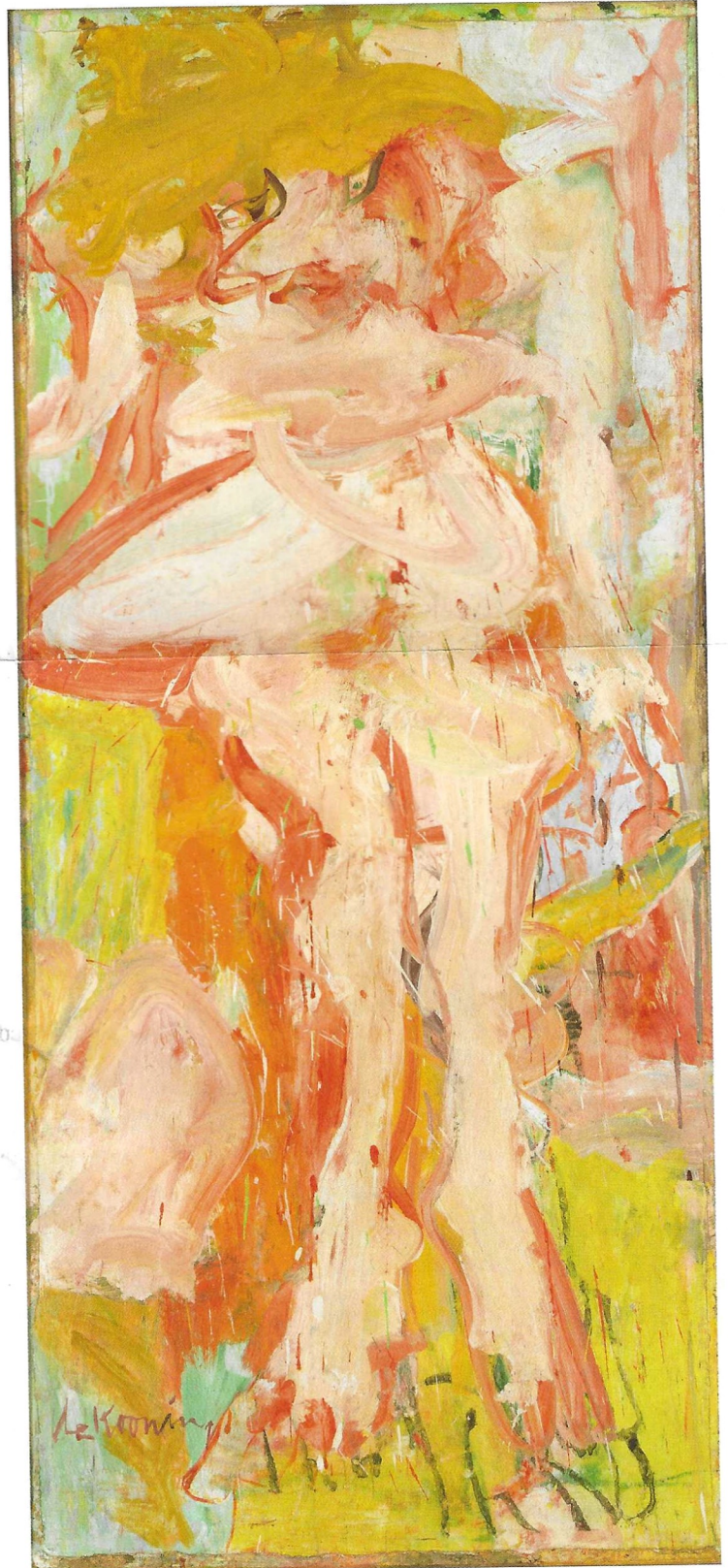
Chaïm Soutine with a hanging chicken in his studio in Le Blanc (Indre), 1927
Bridgeman Images

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Rudy Burckhardt,
Willem de Kooning working on drawings for *Woman I*, 1950

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Willem de Kooning,
Woman Accabonac, 1966
New York, Whitney Museum of American Art





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Exhibition tie-ins

For visitors

Audioguide (French, English)

For all visitors, €5

Guided tours with a lecturer

(duration 90 minutes):

From 22 September

to 30 December 2021

**Daily during museum opening hours,
except Sundays, 4pm**

For all visitors, €6/€4.50

Remotely

Museum website,

**Petits M'O children's website,
exhibition catalogue**

**Musée d'Orsay / Hazan joint
publication, 232 pages, €40**

Programme and bookings musee-orangerie.fr



Curators

Claire Bernardi, chef curator of
the Musée d'Orsay
Simonetta Fraquelli,
Independent curator and art
historian

Exhibition organised by
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Philadelphie.

EPMO

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Willem de Kooning,
Amityville, 1971,
Jennifer and Dan Gilbert
Collection