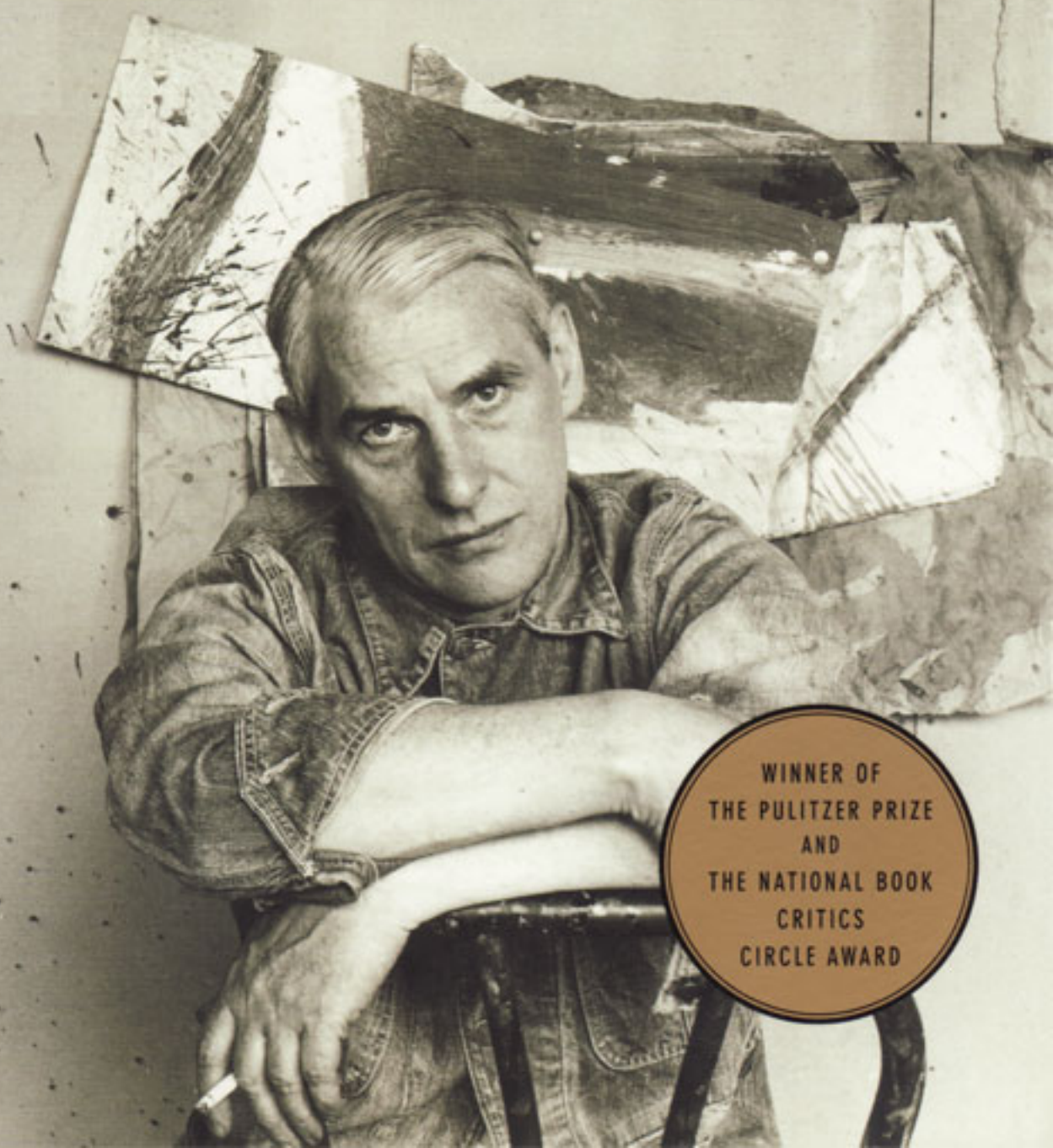


MARK STEVENS and ANNALYN SWAN

de Kooning

AN AMERICAN MASTER



WINNER OF
THE PULITZER PRIZE
AND
THE NATIONAL BOOK
CRITICS
CIRCLE AWARD

The success that attended the exhibition seemed surreal, almost miraculous, to de Kooning. Less than a year before, he had still been mired in *Woman I*, working on a painting that he was confident few would like. The struggle had damaged his health, he believed, and friends told him that he was harming his career. Now, all around, friends, painters, and hangers-on congratulated him. The Museum of Modern Art was buying *Woman I*, and Blanchette Rockefeller, the wife of John D. Rockefeller III and a great patron of the Museum of Modern Art, was buying *Woman II*. Blanchette Rockefeller! A symbol of class, privilege, and inherited wealth. A graceful woman of impeccable manners. (About this time, de Kooning was introduced to Blanchette. Often nervous when in the presence of the lofty rich, de Kooning, wanting to make a good impression, was tongue-tied for a moment. Then he let out "You look like a million bucks!") Who could have predicted that *Blanchette Rockefeller* would one day bestow approval upon a de Kooning *Woman*? An unimaginable gulf lay between two such women. De Kooning had come a long way from North Rotterdam, and his triumph seemed complete. And then, like a ghostly Greek messenger come to warn the king of hubris, a slight figure appeared at de Kooning's door.

No one in New York admired de Kooning more than the young Robert Rauschenberg or better understood what de Kooning was bringing to contemporary art. Rauschenberg loved all the usual things that people appreciated in de Kooning's work—the vital, brushy touch, the spirited draftsmanship, and the unmistakable bravura. And, like so many young artists of the time, he respected the many years of struggle. But Rauschenberg also admired in *Woman I* precisely those things that made the art world uncomfortable. Rauschenberg believed in its clash of high and low and its messy embrace of the open-ended. Most of all, perhaps, he loved the rude parodic squawk in the temple of art. That was the American

sound of modernity. Later critics who would one day admire *Woman I* rarely acknowledged how important the picture was not just to Rauschenberg, but to the evolution of pop and later American art.

Nonetheless, Rauschenberg knew that the older artist would not appreciate this particular errand. "I was hoping to God," he said, "that he wouldn't be home." Rauschenberg brought along a bottle of liquor to bolster his courage. "I was completely prepared to share it with him." But de Kooning was home and greeted Rauschenberg affectionately. Accustomed to visits by young artists, de Kooning was friendly and willing to talk. He particularly enjoyed this playful young man. How could he not? Apart from Rauschenberg's winning manner and mischievous smile—he looked like a boy with his hand eternally caught in the cookie jar—much of the young artist's work was an homage to de Kooning. For a while, the two men engaged in small talk. And then Rauschenberg, hemming and hawing, asked the older man if he might have a drawing. That in itself was not unusual. Artist friends often exchanged work. But Rauschenberg wanted the drawing not to hang in his studio, but to *erase*.

There was a moment of silence. The younger man wanted de Kooning to hurry up and just give him a minor drawing so he could quickly leave. But de Kooning instead chose to take his time. He went to the door and leaned a painting against it, in order to ensure that the two artists would not be disturbed. He told Rauschenberg: "I know what you're doing."

De Kooning was referring, in part, to Rauschenberg's recent monochromatic paintings; erasing a drawing would create a ghostly monochromatic work without imagery. But de Kooning was doubtless aware of the many other implications of Rauschenberg's request. The young artist was engaged in a symbolic act of generational and Oedipal murder, at once comic and deadly serious. He was ridding himself of a burdensome father. He was doing so, moreover, in the joking language of Dada, a movement that did not respect the sanctity of the art object or celebrate the romantic passion of de Kooning's generation. He was declaring that, for ambitious art, de Kooning stood in the way. He must be erased. Rauschenberg's errand had little charm for a middle-aged painter who had spent decades struggling to escape from Picasso's shadow. Wasn't he, de Kooning, the emerging artist? To date, de Kooning had enjoyed only three or four years of modest recognition and was still trying to make ends meet. Now, his moment having just arrived, he found a young artist at his door anxious to announce the death of the old man—and lampoon collectors for their desire to own "a de Kooning."

De Kooning probably sensed, too, that Rauschenberg's visit was an omen. It would not be long before art would turn away from de Kooning,

for in the end it was young artists and not writers who performed the essential acts of criticism, clarifying what is fresh and challenging what is stale. (The greatest critic of Cézanne was Picasso during his cubist period. The most devastating critique of academic French art issued from the playful brush and mind of Manet.) Rauschenberg would retain much of de Kooning for the future—his rude American vitality, his open-endedness, and his devotion to a process of permutation and change—but Rauschenberg had to escape from the air of Old World connoisseurship and private touch that was inevitably a part of a de Kooning drawing. Rauschenberg could not make conventional “drawings” or “paintings,” much as he loved them, because he did not believe they contained the contemporary truth. He had to erase that part of de Kooning.

De Kooning recognized that Rauschenberg's request was a deep if disturbing compliment: the son loves the father he must kill. And so, he returned the compliment, playing out his part in the Oedipal game with surpassing generosity. He did not let the affair become just an inside joke that could be easily dismissed. He made the younger artist squirm, for the death of a father must not come too easily to a son, especially if that son is an artist. “He really made me suffer,” Rauschenberg said, referring to the elaborate process that de Kooning established for the execution. De Kooning brought over a portfolio of drawings and began leafing through them. At last, he seemed to settle on one. He looked at it. But then he slipped the drawing back into the portfolio. “No,” he said, “I want to give you one that I'll miss.”

De Kooning brought over a second portfolio. He leafed through it as slowly as he had the first, examining one drawing and then the next. “These I would miss,” he said. “I like them.” He seemed to settle on a particular image. “No,” he said at last, “I want it to be very hard to erase.” He brought over a third portfolio. Finally, he selected an important, fleshy drawing for sacrifice—a dense mixed-media image that contained, Rauschenberg said, “charcoal, lead, everything. It took me two months and even then it wasn't completely erased. I wore out a lot of erasers.” Later, de Kooning became angry when the younger artist publicly exhibited *Erased de Kooning*. De Kooning believed the murder should have remained private, a personal affair between artists, rather than splashed before the public. He was from an older generation.