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# Surrealists in New York

Charles Darwent

An absorbing group biography revealing how exiles from war-torn France brought Surrealism to America, sparking the movement that became Abstract Expressionism.

84 illustrations

23.4 x 15.3 cm

264pp

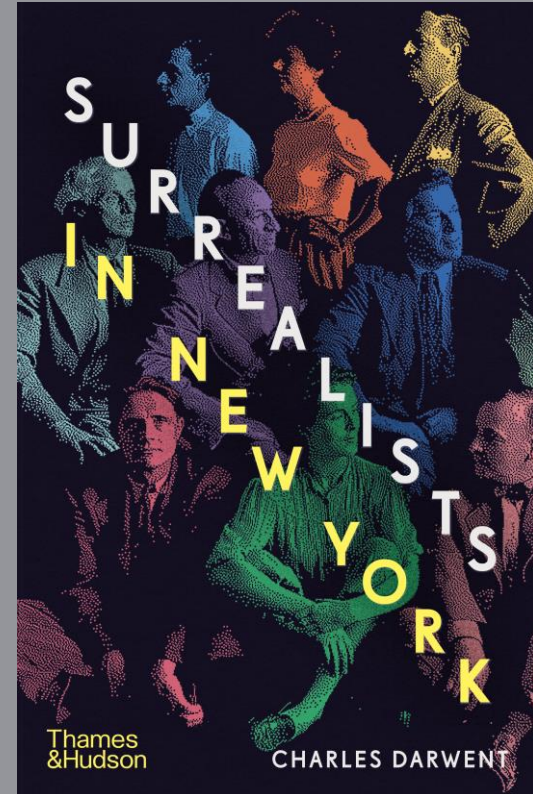
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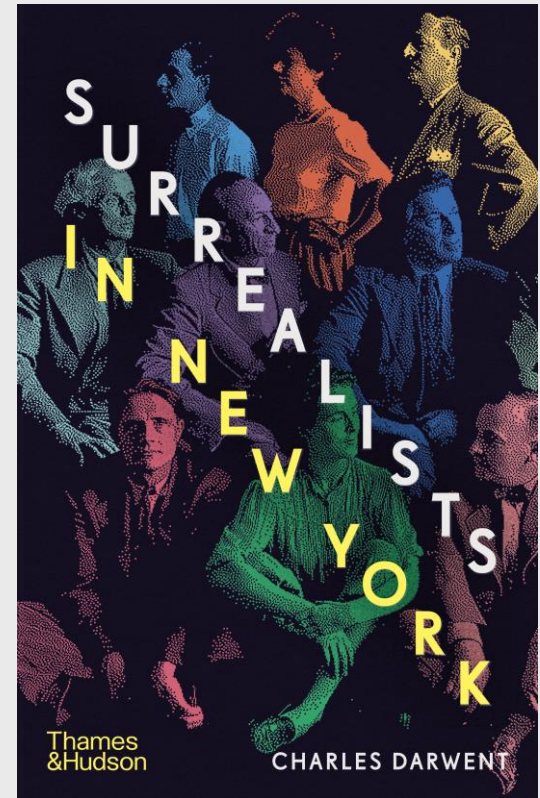
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Book

# Praise for *Surrealists in New York*

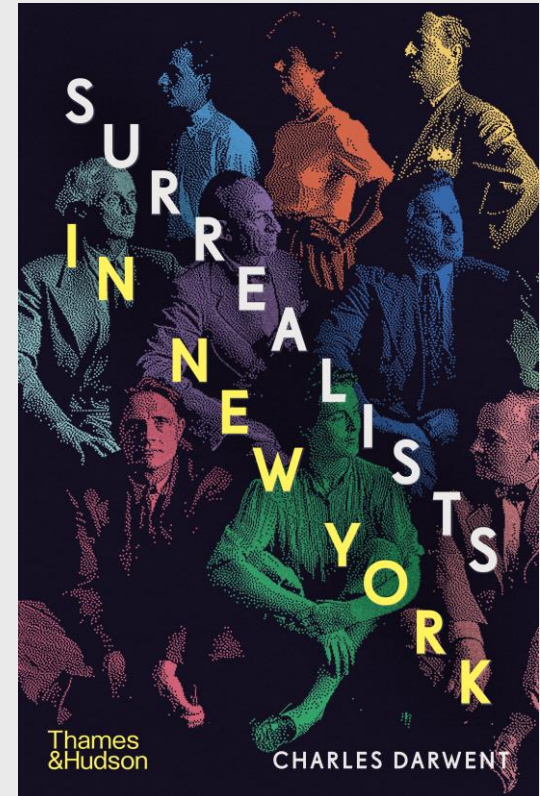
'I couldn't believe the book hadn't been written'

Robert Storr, art historian and ex-MoMA curator



## Key Sales Points

- An exciting portrayal of a pivotal moment in the history of art, offering a different perspective on the emergence of Abstract Expressionism.
- Reflects on the benefits of cross-cultural exchanges and migration, subjects that will resonate with today's readers.
- Written by a witty and engaging commentator and journalist.
- Breaks out of art history into narrative non-fiction; 'I couldn't believe the book hadn't been written' – Robert Storr, art historian and ex-MoMA curator





## Introduction

In 1957, in the catalogue essay to a show at the Whitney Museum, the American artist Robert Motherwell made an unexpected claim. 'I have only known two painting milieus well personally,' Motherwell wrote. 'The Parisian Surrealists, with whom I began painting seriously in New York in 1940, and the native movement that developed in New York that has come to be known as "abstract expressionism", but which genetically would have been more properly called "abstract surrealism".'<sup>1</sup>

Two things were surprising about his remarks. The first was that Motherwell was himself counted among the founders of abstract expressionism, along with Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning. All four were American (in De Kooning's case, by adoption) - the movement they had founded ergo likewise. The second surprise was the place Motherwell had chosen to stake his claim: in a catalogue for the Whitney Museum of American Art.

In 1957, with Khrushchev threatening the US with thermonuclear annihilation, Motherwell's musings seemed to verge on the treasonous. What he appeared to be saying - what he was saying - was that AbEx (as it was by then known to the cognoscenti) was neither new nor native. It had been born of a brief liaison between America and France, and its paternity was French. And he was saying all this at the Whitney, the lion's den of American art.

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That Motherwell's remark should, in 1957, have seemed mildly shocking is, at least peripherally, the story of this book.<sup>2</sup> The factual basis of his claim was beyond question. Sensing the Nazi disaster that was about to break over Europe, Parisian artists had begun to arrive in New York even before the outbreak of the Second World War. As in Paris itself, the majority of these were surrealists. By 1941, the heavy hitters of surrealism - André Masson, Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst - had made their way to Manhattan by various and often perilous routes. So, too, the so-called Pope of Surrealism, André Breton. Along with these came boatloads of lesser-known names: the Swiss painter Kurt Seligmann; an Englishman

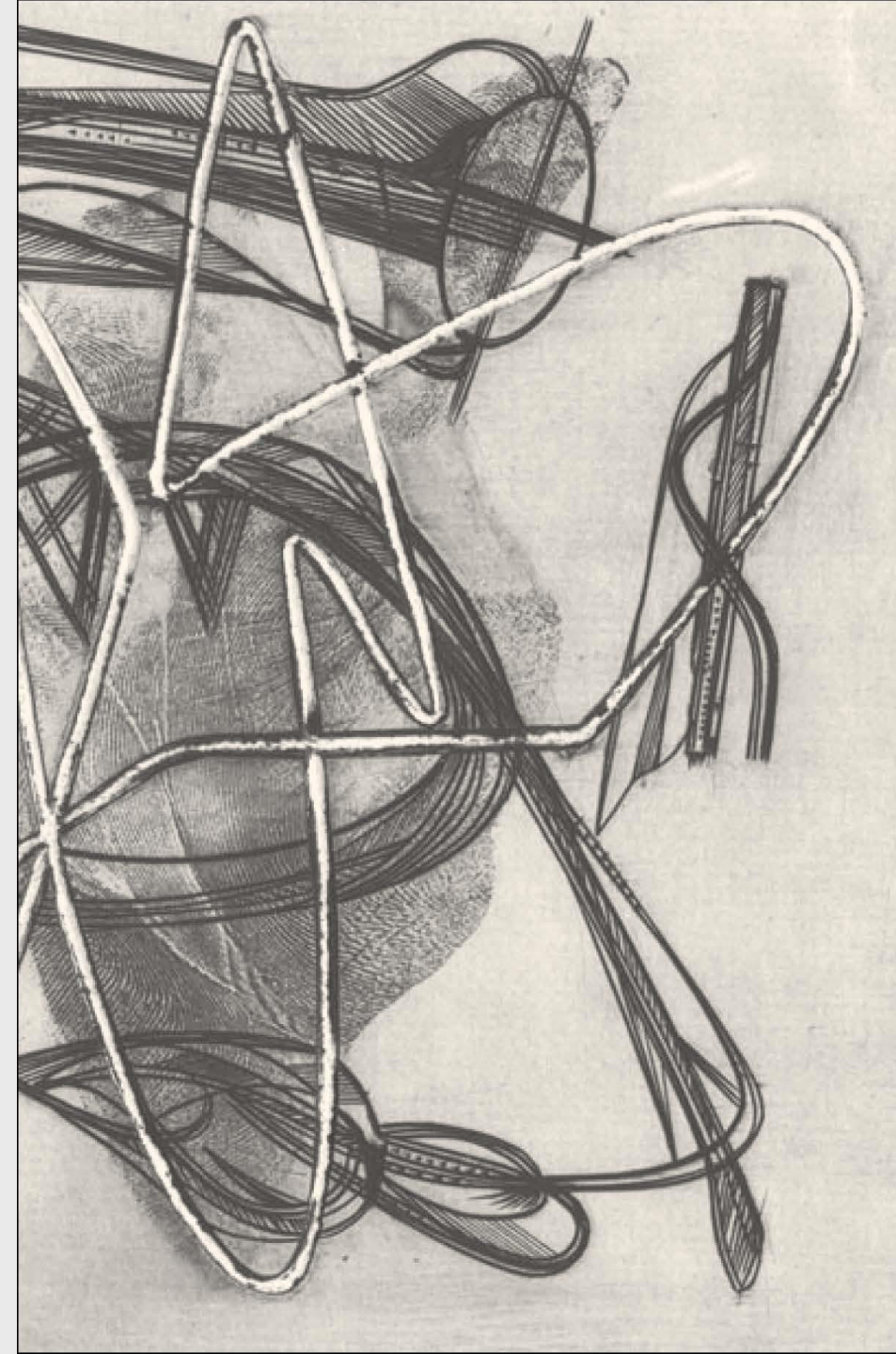
Probably, no British artist has been so influential internationally.

'Hayter, Stanley William', *Oxford Dictionary of Art*<sup>1</sup>

In the early autumn of 1926, Edith Fletcher saw an unexpected figure lumbering between the tram tracks of the boulevard du Montparnasse. Fletcher, an American painter, was sitting on the terrace of the Le Select café with the man she was to marry that December, a twenty-five-year-old Englishman called Stanley William Hayter.<sup>2</sup> Half a century later, Hayter would recall his first sight of his wife-to-be's late fellow pupil at the Art Students League in New York, newly arrived in Paris: 'like a stoutish baby staggering with no seeming trust in the security of biped progress...a bearlike figure [in] a bright mustard suit lively enough to scare the horses...and a walrus moustache'.<sup>3</sup> Fletcher called out to the bear, who came over. His name was Alexander Calder.

It was a propitious meeting. Both Calder and Hayter had come to the city earlier that year, with the same motive and similar histories. Although both now meant to be artists, each had trained and worked as a scientist: Calder as an engineer, latterly in the American merchant navy, and Hayter as a chemist and geologist with the Anglo-Persian Oil Company in what was soon to be called Iran. For both men, the jettisoning of science for art was a reversion to familial type. Calder's parents were artists, as was his paternal grandfather; Hayter, for his part, had four successive generations of artists behind him.

The pull of Paris as the home of modern art had been strong on both of them, too. Calder had worked his way across the Atlantic from New York on a freighter to get there while Hayter, having thrown in his job in Abadan, arrived from London on a second-hand motorcycle. Bar a decade in New York in the 1940s, he would stay in Paris for the rest of his life. Calder would be there for seven years, returning to Massachusetts in 1933. His friendship with Hayter would last until his death in 1976. For much of that time, the two men worked, and made work, together, in the print studio that Hayter had founded in Paris in 1927 and then, in 1940, moved to New York.





ABOVE Max Ernst, Jacqueline Lamba, André Masson, André Breton and Varian Fry photographed by Ylla (Camilla Koffler) in Marseilles, 1941.

BELOW European refugees, including Jacqueline Lamba and Wifredo Lam, on board the converted cargo ship *SS Capitaine-Paul-Lemerle* sailing from Marseilles to Martinique, 1941.

After dropping the Bretons at their new flat at 60 West Ninth Street, Hayter's first act was to take André Breton for a *pastis* at the Brevoort Hotel.<sup>5</sup> That great chronicler of midcentury Village life, Joseph Mitchell, described the pavement café in front of the Brevoort as 'one of the novelities of the Village'. 'It was just a couple of rows of tables set back behind a hedge growing in a row of wooden boxes painted white,' he mused, 'but people thought it was very European and very elegant.'<sup>6</sup>

Hayter's choice of venue acknowledged what he had correctly anticipated would be a problem for his transplanted *anciens*. In Paris, surrealism's wars had been fought and won not in the classroom or lecture hall but in the café: the Deux Magots, the Flore, Le Select, and a dozen other places colonized by tribes of often fiercely warring writers and artists. In Manhattan, this network of kerbside debating chambers simply did not exist.

As Anaïs Nin noted, Yves Tanguy was among the first to be struck down by *nostalgie du café*. 'We are all seeking to live in the present, to find our life in the present,' Nin wrote in 1940. 'We have forbidden [ourselves] to talk about the past or to live in the past. But Tanguy talks about Breton and the cafés in Paris, Gonzalo constantly recalls Montparnasse... Tanguy complains, "I used to live in the streets. Here, I never want to go out."...The tragedy is that just as we were about to enjoy our maturity in Europe, which loves and appreciates maturity, we were all uprooted and placed in a country which loves only youth and immaturity.'<sup>7</sup>

As Breton would later be, Tanguy was also at a loss linguistically. Writing to his friend in Budapest, the surrealist textile designer Marcel Jean, he mourned, 'Naturally, I speak pretty well no English, which is beginning to make me feel like a joke.'<sup>8</sup> Gordon Onslow Ford remembered him as 'like a fish out of water...[with] only a small circle of friends, mostly French speaking'.<sup>9</sup> The effect of all this on Tanguy would be long-lasting. In 1947, Fred Becker recalled, '[The Scottish poet] Ruthven [Todd] and Tanguy would hit all those [Irish bars along Third Avenue] and when Tanguy got to Atelier 17 the next morning his hands would be trembling. We had coated a plate for him and he sat down and took an etching needle and made this perfect drawing, not a wiggle in it.'<sup>10</sup>

Eventually, a café-cum-bar called the Jumble Shop on West Eighth Street, known always to the French as *'le Jumble'*, came to serve as a



being baked with a granular coating, soaked in another bath and re-inked in colour. Nothing in Masson's past as a printmaker comes near it in technical complexity.

In compositional terms, too, *Emblème* is more complicated than it seems. At first glance, its skull-like central motif looks as though it might have been made as a Rorschach test, its two halves folded over and blotted along a vertical axis marked by a mouth, a single, Massonian eye-vagina and, above these, a star-shaped Ajna chakra. It calls to mind Gordon Onslow Ford's injunction to engage the cycloptic eye when looking at Hayter's work. Certainly, Hayter is behind the making of *Emblème*, the print's technical complexities impossible without his hand.

Where *Rape* had been Hayter-like in its abstract loops and whorls, though, *Emblème* is more straightforwardly illusional. Even more so is *La Génie de l'espèce* (1942), made a few months after the two prints above, although its Tanguy-esque *bizarrierie* of bamboo limbs and male/female pudenda seems surrealist in an oddly old-fashioned way.<sup>66</sup> [3.7] The print's combination of burin and drypoint lines suggest Masson going over familiar territory as a template for trying out new ways of working. The date of their making apart, two things link these three very different prints. First, they show Masson in the grip of a creative frenzy, looking backward and forward technically, stylistically and iconographically. Second, *Rape*, *Emblème* and *La Génie de l'espèce* see him using the relatively unfamiliar tools of intaglio printing to ask questions whose answers would occupy him as a painter for the next five decades [3.8]. Atelier 17 was not just a place to make prints for him, or even to learn the skills of printmaking. It was a laboratory of art.

Masson was not the only exiled Parisian painter to find himself now thinking in print, nor even the best known. In August 1941, Marc Chagall and his wife arrived in New York from their safe house in Provence. If they

OPPOSITE ABOVE Max Ernst surrounded by kachina dolls, photographed by James Thrall Soby, c. 1942.

OPPOSITE BELOW Peggy Guggenheim's apartment photographed by Hermann Landshoff, 1942. From left to right: Leonora Carrington, Fernand Léger, John Ferren, Berenice Abbott, Amédée Ozenfant, Peggy Guggenheim, Frederick Kiesler, Jimmy Ernst, Stanley William Hayter, Marcel Duchamp, Piet Mondrian, Kurt Seligmann, André Breton and Max Ernst.



1.14 Yves Tanguy, *Titre inconnu (noyer indifférent)*, 1929.  
Oil on canvas, 91.1 × 73.2 cm (35 $\frac{1}{2}$  × 28 $\frac{3}{4}$  in.)



1.13 Yves Tanguy, frontispiece for Paul Éluard's *La Vie immédiate*, 1932.





1.8A Stanley William Hayter, *Paysage anthropophage*, 1937.  
Oil on board, 100 × 200 cm (39 $\frac{3}{4}$  × 78 $\frac{3}{4}$  in.).

2.5 Stanley William Hayter, *Falling Figure*, 1947. Engraving  
and soft-ground etching in black with colour screenprint on wove paper,  
45.1 × 37.8 cm (17 $\frac{3}{4}$  × 15 in.).



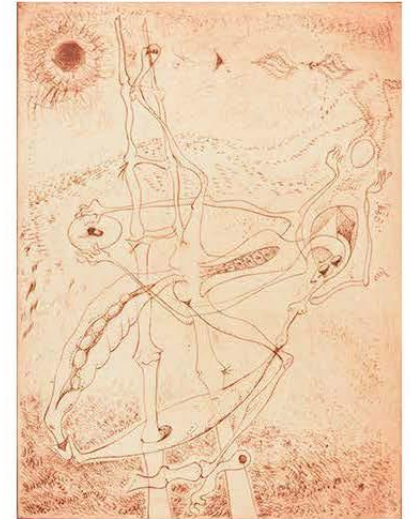
2.7 Stanley William Hayter, *Untitled*, 1942. Oil on canvas,  
101.6 × 127 cm (40 × 50 in.).



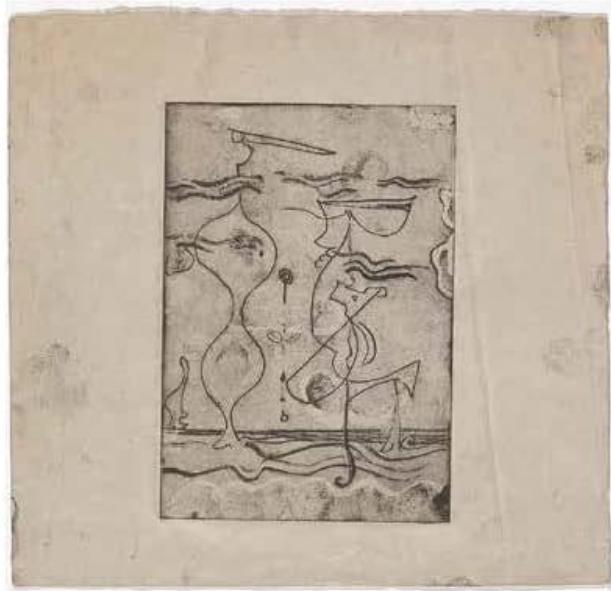
3.4 André Masson, *Dans la tour du sommeil* (*In the Tower of Sleep*), 1938. Oil on canvas, 81.3 × 100.3 cm (32½ × 39½ in.).



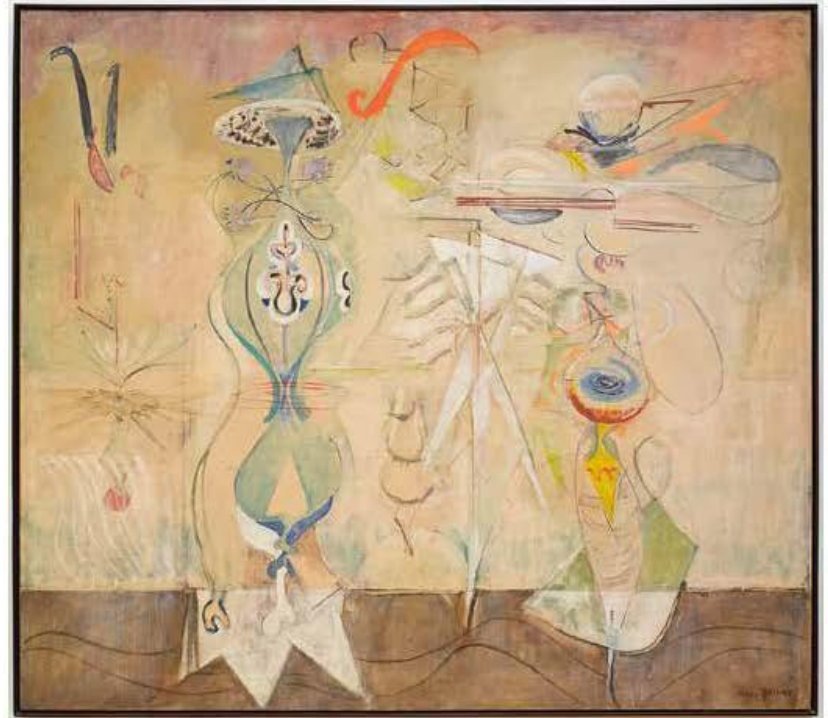
3.6 André Masson, *Emblème* (*Emblem*), 1942. Soft-ground colour etching and aquatint, 24 × 22.3 cm (9½ × 8¾ in.).



3.7 André Masson, *Le Génie de l'espèce* (*The Genius of the Species*), 1942. Drypoint and engraving, 36.5 × 27.5 cm (14¾ × 10¾ in.).



4.10 Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, c. 1951. Etching  
24.5 x 25.4 cm (9 $\frac{5}{8}$  x 10 in.).



4.11 Mark Rothko, *Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea*, 1944.  
Oil on canvas, 191.4 x 215.2 cm (75 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 84 $\frac{3}{4}$  in.).

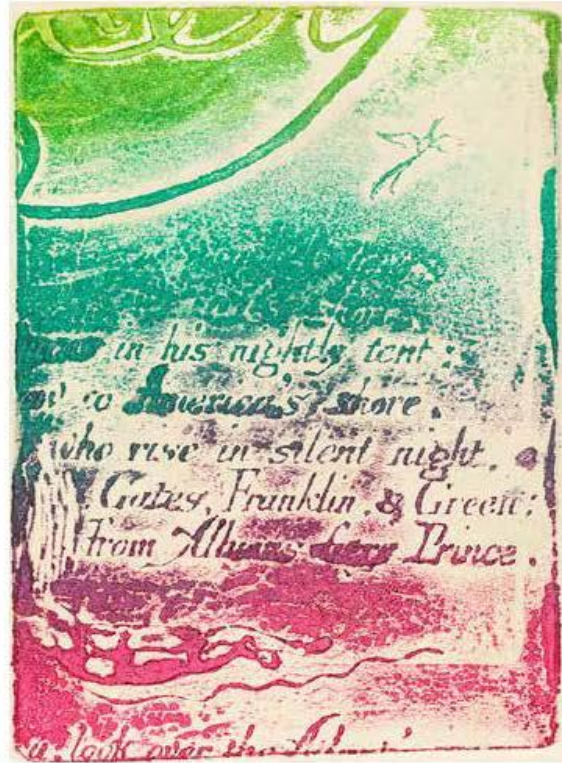


5.2 Reuben Kadish, *Lith*, 1945. Etching and aquatint,  
52.2 x 37 cm (20% x 14% in.).

5.7 Jackson Pollock, *Untitled (1)*, state I of III, 1944.  
Engraving, 4.8 x 31.1 cm (18% x 12% in.).



5.7A Jackson Pollock, *Birth*, c. 1941. Oil on canvas,  
116.4 x 55.1 cm (45% x 21% in.).



7.2 William Blake, restrike from fragment of cancelled plate for *A Prophecy*, 1793. Relief etching, pulled on coloured background, made by rolling up the other side of the plate with inks and running it through the press.



7.6 Joan Miró, *L'Antitète (diptych)*, 1947-8. Open bite etching, 25.4 x 16.2 cm (10 x 6 3/8 in.).

7.11 Joan Miró, *Femme et oiseau devant la lune*, 1947. Etching, 19.7 x 23.2 cm (7 7/8 x 9 1/4 in.).



8.8 Jackson Pollock, *Untitled*, 1951. Ink and gouache on paper, 63.1 x 99.9 cm (24 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 39 $\frac{3}{4}$  in.).



8.10 Louise Bourgeois, *Le Cauchemar de Hayter*, 1996. Lithograph, 63.5 x 49.5 cm (25 x 19 $\frac{1}{2}$  in.).



Postcards showing the Jumble Shop on West 8th Street.

Karl Schrag, who had joined Atelier 17 as it moved from the New School, described it as ‘a meeting place where problems far beyond printmaking were discussed. It was not at all like a crafts school or anything like that.’ He recalled, ‘What most of [the studio’s artists] had on their mind was to use their gifts as painters or sculptors in another medium. Hayter usually came at five and left at ten. After the work was

done we all went out to the Cedar Tavern or some other place. There would be a lot of very interesting discussion mixed with jokes.’<sup>54</sup> After one semester, students would be given a key to the Atelier to come and go as they pleased; more advanced artists were handed one on the first day.<sup>55</sup> ‘You could work [in the Atelier] all day and all night if you had a project going, but it wasn’t that you would just sit there day after day and work,’ Schrag explained. ‘It was like your own studio.’<sup>56</sup>

One artist who used it in this way was Ian Hugo. The long-suffering husband of Anaïs Nin and the first of the Paris *anciens* to rejoin Atelier 17 in New York, Hugo was also to be the most fervent apostle of Hayter’s ideas on the burin, set out in his own book, *New Eyes on the Art of Engraving*.<sup>57</sup> In January 1944, Nin not only self-published but self-printed *Under a Glass Bell*, the collection of short stories that would set her on the road to fame. The printing was done in a one-woman workshop, the Gemor Press, set up in nearby MacDougal Street with the assistance of Nin’s Peruvian lover, Gonzalo More.

In 1942, printing her incestuous two-part novella *Winter of Artifice* on the Gemor’s old-fashioned letter press, Nin had confided to her diary, ‘Gonzalo and I decided to use the William Blake method learned from William Hayter.’<sup>58</sup> Now, two years later, she warmed to the theme. ‘The first copy of *Under a Glass Bell*. An exquisite piece of workmanship,’



Anaïs Nin at her printing press.