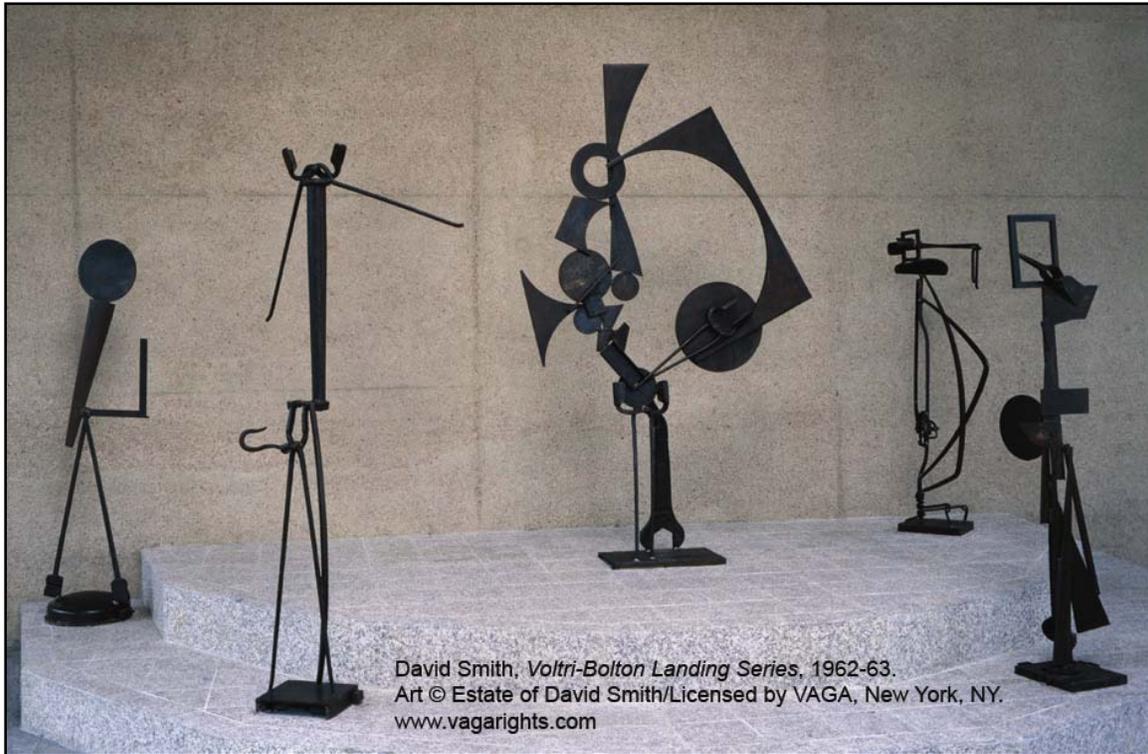


Learning to Look



Looking to Learn

A pre-visit guide
for the Empire State Plaza
Art Collection

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Teachers:

In order to better prepare your students for a trip to the Empire State Plaza Art Collection, view each slide and read or discuss the information provided. Questions are posed to help facilitate the looking process. Please return this package when you bring your class to tour the Plaza Art Collection.

Note:

It is sometimes difficult or impossible to judge the scale of an artwork from a slide reproduction, so the dimensions of the artworks are listed in the text to help you and your students to better visualize each piece.

Introduction

The Empire State Plaza Art Collection is one of the greatest collections of modern American art in any single public site that is not a museum. It is part of the architectural complex envisioned by New York Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller (1908-1979; Governor 1959-1973).

The ninety-two paintings, sculptures, and tapestries that make up the collection were selected by a distinguished group of people appointed by Governor Rockefeller. The Art Commission operated from 1966-1973. Its task was to select high quality, reasonably inexpensive art by living artists for the permanent collection at the Plaza. With few exceptions, the work selected was limited to abstract art because the commission wanted to give uniformity to the collection and because it felt that abstract art of the 1960's would best complement the modern architecture of the Plaza.

Even though the collection consists of a wide variety of styles, nearly all the works are from the **"New York School"**. Considered avant-garde at the time it was created, the New York School has now acquired mainstream status and is the first American art movement to have a truly worldwide impact. Whether the artists utilized expressive gestural means, hard-edge geometric forms, or large fields of color to create visual images, they were all concerned with making art which broke with tradition.

The following slides and commentary will examine some of the new directions explored by New York School artists as they sought to redefine the nature of art. Many characteristics of modern art are covered and each is illustrated by an artwork from the Plaza Art Collection.

New Ideas/New Methods: A Break with Tradition

The year 1945 marked the end of World War II and the beginning of a new global society. The world was a much different place from what it was just six years earlier when the war began: New countries emerged as old countries disappeared. Science created technology that could save or destroy humanity. Millions of people were displaced or killed, and their homes destroyed. As members of this new world order, artists, like everyone else, had to come to terms with the terrible events of World War II. Artists expressed change through their art. However, they believed that old, traditional artistic styles and methods were not able to properly communicate their feelings. For this reason, artists experimented with new ideas, styles, and methods.

To give you an idea what these changes were, compare the nineteenth century painting, *Scene on Catskill Creek*, by **Hudson River School** artist Frederic Church, to Joan Mitchell's 1967 **Abstract Expressionist** painting *La Seine*.

Image 1

Frederic Church
Morning in the Tropics
1877
oil on canvas

Image 2

Joan Mitchell
La Seine
1967
oil on canvas

It is interesting to note that both these paintings represent **landscape**. Church had a deeply expressive quality of painting a landscape shown by his exactness and close attention to detail. *Morning in the Tropics* is a neat and orderly view of the world. Joan Mitchell's painting, *La Seine*, a river that runs through France, is not a typical landscape. At your first glance, you might not know this is a landscape except by its title. But by looking very carefully, you may distinguish qualities reminiscent of a landscape. Joan Mitchell and the Abstract Expressionists taught us that art did not have to be an exact mirror of the world.

- What are some words you can think of to describe *La Seine* by Joan Mitchell?

- What are some qualities in this work that remind you of a landscape?
- How does this painting reflect the time in which it was made?
- What does this painting express about the artist?

It is important to note, that in spite of its abstract quality, *La Seine* is highly organized. The composition is balanced symmetrically on four panels. The brush strokes and the density of forms are uniform. Certain colors dominate the painting.

(Note to teachers: Help your students look more closely at the structure of the composition.)

Abstraction

As we saw in Joan Mitchell's painting, *La Seine*, Abstract Expressionist artists painted views of the world interpreted by their feelings. We can say Joan Mitchell's painting is **objective** because, although it is nearly impossible to recognize, it is a place or thing in view of the artist. Other Abstract Expressionist artists painted **non-objective** art, or art that is not based on any object at all. The subject in non-objective paintings is often the artist's inner-self.

Image 3

Jackson Pollock
Number 12, 1952
 102" x 89"

Image 3

detail

Look at *Number 12* by Jackson Pollock. Is there any object in this painting you recognize? Absolutely not. Pollock was well known for painting only what he felt in the moments he worked. He was a very spontaneous artist, often dripping, spattering or throwing paint onto the canvas.

- What do you think this painting expresses about the artist?
- By looking at this painting, how do you think Pollock applied the paint to the canvas?
- Although this painting is abstract, what are some important **elements of art** used by the artist to express his feeling? Describe these elements and how they contribute to the overall composition.
 (Answer: The artist used color, line, texture and form. None are formally organized, further giving proof to the spontaneity of the piece.)

Image 5

Claes Oldenburg
Geometric Mouse, Variation I, 1969
 painted steel and aluminum
 11'6" x 12' x 8'

This sculpture by Claes Oldenburg is an example of **objective** abstract art.

- What object is this work of art based on?
- How is it abstract?

Oldenburg abstracted the image of the mouse by using flat, geometric shapes that loosely represent the different parts of the body of the mouse. Abstract artists simplify, distort or omit the details of an object.

Look carefully at this slide and see how many parts of the mouse you can find.

ears	tongue	tail
nose	heart	eyes
body	foot	mouth

- What important element is missing from this sculpture that might make it look more **realistic**, or life-like? (Answer: Color)

Activity:

Spontaneously pick an object within your view and sketch a quick abstraction of it by reducing the details of the object into simple forms.

Time Limit: 2 minutes.

Share the sketches with your classmates.

Emotion

As we have already learned, many important post-World War II artists used abstraction as a means of expressing feelings or emotion. Using what you have already learned, look carefully at *Charcoal Black and Tan* by Franz Kline and describe some of its elements.

Image 6

Franz Kline (1910-1962)
Charcoal Black and Tan, 1959
 oil on canvas
 9'4" x 6'10 ½ "

- What makes you think this work of art is an expression of emotions? What emotions do you think the artist is expressing?
- Do you think Kline painted this work slowly and methodically or quickly and spontaneously? Why?
- How and with what do you think the artist applied paint to the canvas? (Teachers: Make the distinction that the artist did not use a small, dainty paintbrush like the types used by Hudson River School artists. In all likelihood, the artist probably used a large-sized paintbrush, like the type used to paint a house.)
- Note the absence of color. How does that further add to the character of the painting?
- Is this an objective or non-objective abstract painting?
- Can you think of anything else that makes this painting unusual? (Teachers: This is a very subjective question and meant to make the students look more closely at the work. One answer, however, to consider is the great size of this painting which they may not necessarily be able to detect from the slide.)

The word 'gesture' means to move a part of your body, such as your arms, as a way of expressing ideas or emotions. It is sometimes used to describe Abstract Expressionism. The surface of a gestural painting is often thick with paint and clearly shows the action of the artist. Look at *Charcoal Black and Tan* again. Can you explain why the artist, Franz Kline, is called a gesture painter?

New Materials/Found Objects: Different Sculpture

Sculptors also created non-objective, abstract art. But unlike most painting, the radical switch between traditional sculpture and modern sculpture involved not only subject matter but **medium** as well.

- What are some traditional mediums used by sculptors?

Image 7

David Smith (1906-1965)
Volton XVIII, 1963
painted steel
9'2" x 5'4" x 1'3"

David Smith was one of many artists who experimented with different, non-traditional, mediums. In many sculptures, Smith used **found objects** as a medium. Found objects are objects used in sculpture (or even painting!) that were not meant for art. Found objects can be just about anything. As the phrase signifies, these objects were found by the artist, not purchased from a store. David Smith found his objects in junkyards, old garages, or in the streets. Found objects are usually things no longer used, or discarded as waste.

- What types of found objects appear to be used in this composition?
- How did the artist sculpt the objects together? (Welding)
- Do you think the artist spontaneously sculpted the piece or was there a lot of careful thought and planning? Why?
(Answer: There was a lot of careful thought and planning. In a three-dimensional work of art, in order for the composition to be balanced so it can stand up as it does in *Volton XVIII*, the artist had to carefully provide structural support for the entire piece. Smith was well known for creating studies, or sketches of his sculptures before welding them. This helped him to not only provide support for a sculpture, but also visual balance.)
- But do you think this sculpture **looks** spontaneous? If so, why?
(Teachers: This is a subjective answer. However, the playfulness of the sculpture and all the different shapes look as though there is no organization to the piece. For all we know, the different found objects may have fallen from the sky and stuck there, like snowflakes.)
- What elements of art did David Smith mostly use?
(Shapes and lines.)
- What elements didn't he use?

(Color, or rather a variety of colors. In fact, Smith did paint the sculptures, but only one color to give the many different pieces uniformity.)

“There is something rather noble about junk—
selected junk—junk in one era that performed nobly
for common man—to now be perceived by new
ownership.”

-David Smith

- Overall, what is the significance of using found objects in art? How do objects change once they are used in a work of art? How does the work of art change?

Activity:

Find some of your own found objects and create a sculptural ensemble. In what ways would you imitate David Smith? What new ideas of your own can you invent?

Movement

Image 8

George Rickey
Two Lines Oblique, 1968-1971
54' x 45'

Image 9

view 2

Sculptures and paintings always visually interact with their environment, but what about physically? Many modern artists made sculpture not just to fill space, but also to move in it. Movement is another important element of modern art. This type of sculpture is called **kinetic** sculpture. Kinetic sculpture depends on its environment to fuel its movement. In the case of *Two Lines Oblique*, by George Rickey, its environment is right next to the outdoor reflecting pool at the Empire State Plaza. This is important to know because the plaza can often be a very windy place. On windy days, the two needle-like steel rods at the end of the "Y" shaped structure whip around, creating a never-ending combination of appearances. On slow, tranquil days, the rods move lazily about. The changes in the wind also provide for a change in the character of the sculpture. The fact that it moves gives the sculpture many different personalities.

- What are some other environmental conditions might affect this work of art?

Size

Image 10

Francois Stahly
Labyrinth, 1970-1971
 approximately 180' 0" x 70' 0"
 with 39' 0" center column

As we have seen, Modern artists have learned to express themselves in many different ways. Another element used by artists is size. We know that paintings and sculptures come in all shapes and sizes. But, what is different about many of the works of art at the Empire State Plaza is that they are so large, they would never fit into your home. In fact, many artists created their piece to fit into a specific area. These works will never move. *Labyrinth*, by Francois Stahly, was made specifically for an outdoor space on the plaza. It's size and appearance is often likened to a playground. In fact, most people think it is a playground, and not a work of art.

- How is this work of art different from others you have seen already? (Answer: The fact that this sculpture is so large is the most distinguishing characteristic. But, more important is the fact that the forms that make up this sculpture are not connected. They are spread out, with spaces of concrete and grass in between.)

Another important distinguishing characteristic of *Labyrinth* is the fact that people are allowed to interact with the sculpture. You are allowed to move within and between its various forms. You are even able to climb (although strongly discouraged), or sit on it.

- Why do you think the artist wanted people to walk within the sculptural space?
- Compare *Labyrinth* to the architectural environment of the Empire State Plaza. How is it similar? Different? (Possible answers: *Labyrinth*, like the buildings in the Plaza, is made up of many separate forms that, although do not touch, combine to create a larger environment. However, the forms of *Labyrinth* are rounded or smoothed to create natural, or primitive forms, which contrast the highly modernized plaza buildings. The use of unfinished teakwood adds to the natural effect.)

Glossary

Abstract Expressionism: A type of abstract painting, usually non-objective, that relies on the expression of the artist's emotion or spontaneity as the main vehicle for creativity and subject matter.

Elements of Art: A phrase used to describe the different types of things or techniques employed by the artist to make a work of art. Such basic elements of art are line, shape, and color. Other, more sophisticated, elements of art are pattern, shadow and texture. A visually trained person analyzes the artist's use of elements to help interpret a work of art.

Found Objects: A found object is an existing object, often a mundane manufactured product, which has been given a new identity as an artwork or part of an artwork. Found objects are generally old, or discarded items.

The Hudson River School: A nineteenth-century landscape movement in which artists painstakingly reproduced detailed mirror images of the world. It is called the Hudson River School because many of the artists lived and worked in the Hudson River Valley in New York.

Kinetic Sculpture: Sculpture that contains moving parts, powered by the environment or a motor.

Landscape: A work of art that shows scenery such as mountains, valleys, trees, rivers and forests.

Medium: The material used to create a work of art.

The New York School: An art movement that emerged in post-World War II American society, and named so because the majority of the artists lived and worked in New York. It is widely accepted that the New York School was the first school of American art to gain international status by displacing Paris as the center of the art world. The New York School is also known as abstract expressionist, color field, or minimalist painting and sculpture.

Non-objective: Art whose subject matter does not resemble an object. Non-objective art ranges between Abstract Expressionist artists to Minimalists or op-artists. Non-objective art is a representation of emotions, concepts or ideas that are otherwise not visually expressed.

Objective: A work of art whose subject matter is based on some representation of an object. Objective works of art can still have abstract qualities such as distortion, mis-representation, or absence of detail.

Realistic: The natural, or life-like, representation of people, places, and/or things in a work of art.

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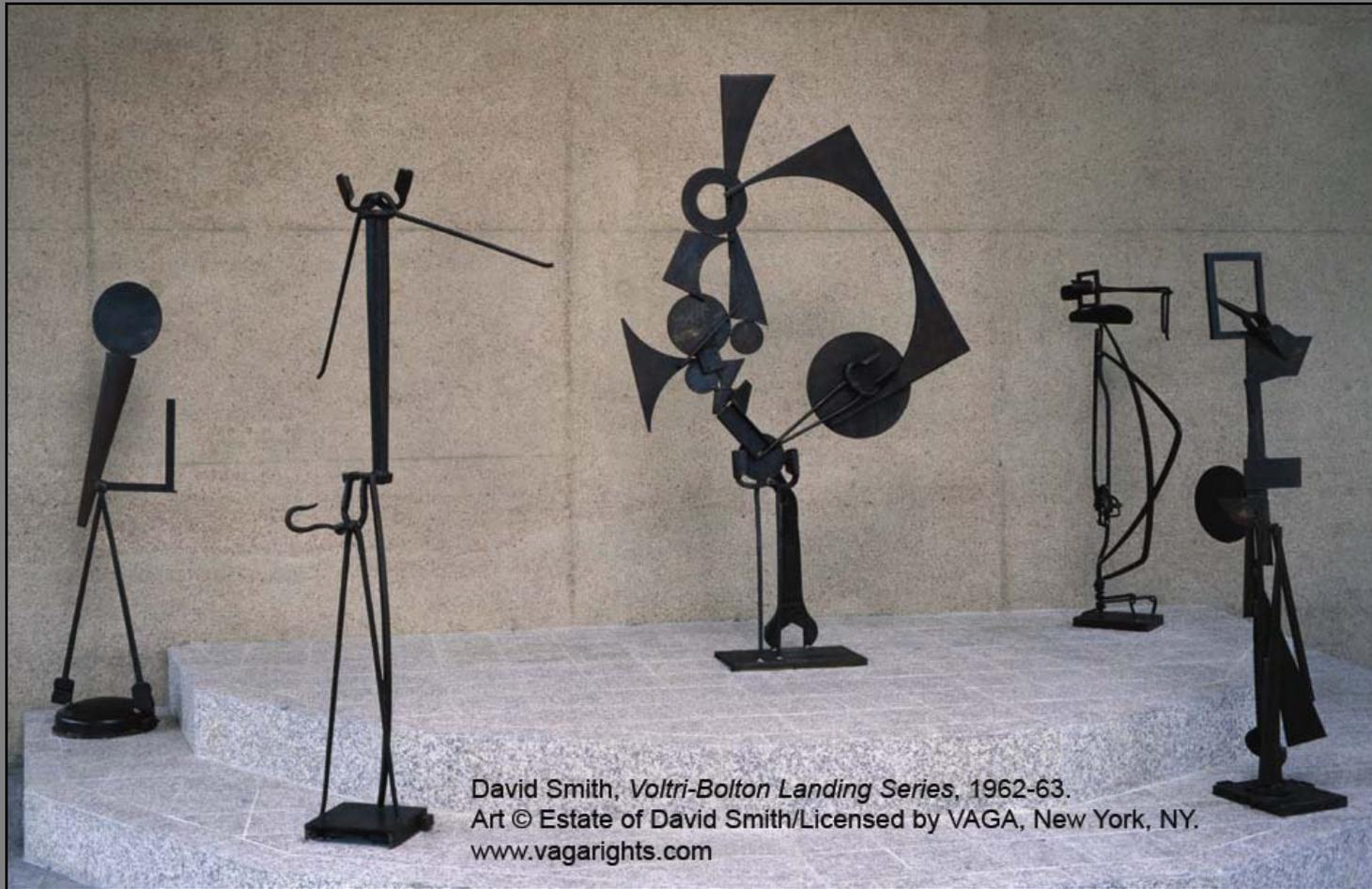


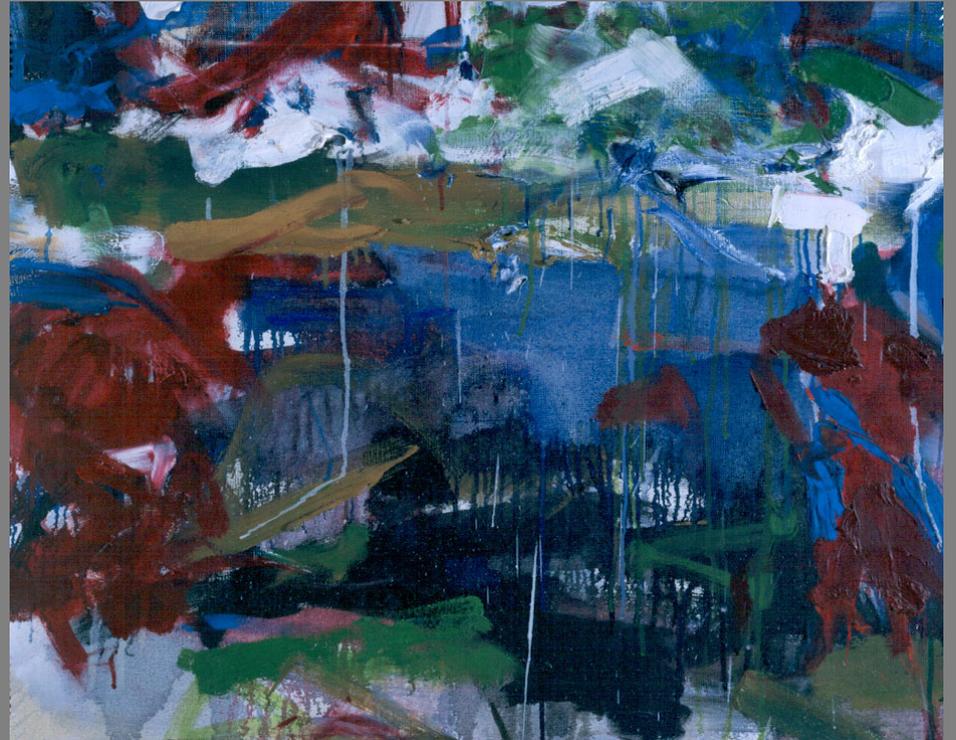


Image 1:

Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a thunderstorm (The Oxbow)*, 1836.



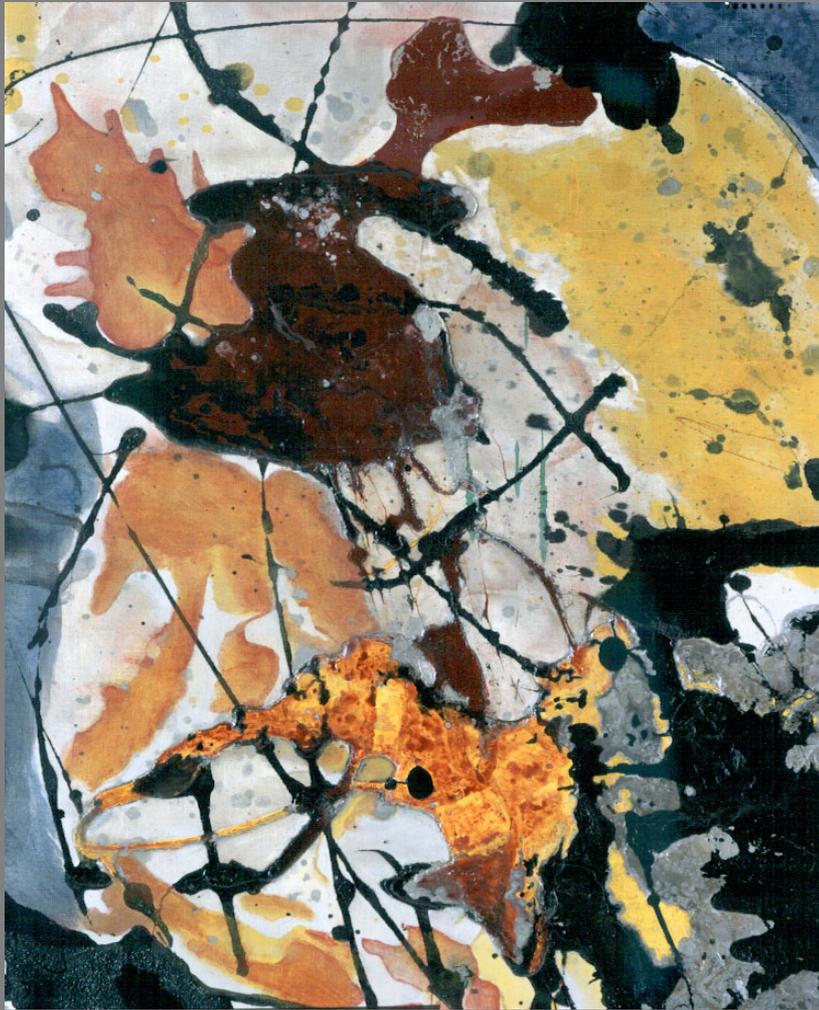
Image 2:
Joan Mitchell, La Seine, 1967
oil on canvas.



Joan Mitchell, *La Seine*, 1967
Details.



Image 3:
Jackson Pollock,
Number 12, 1952,
mixed media.



Jackson Pollock, *Number 12*, 1952, details.

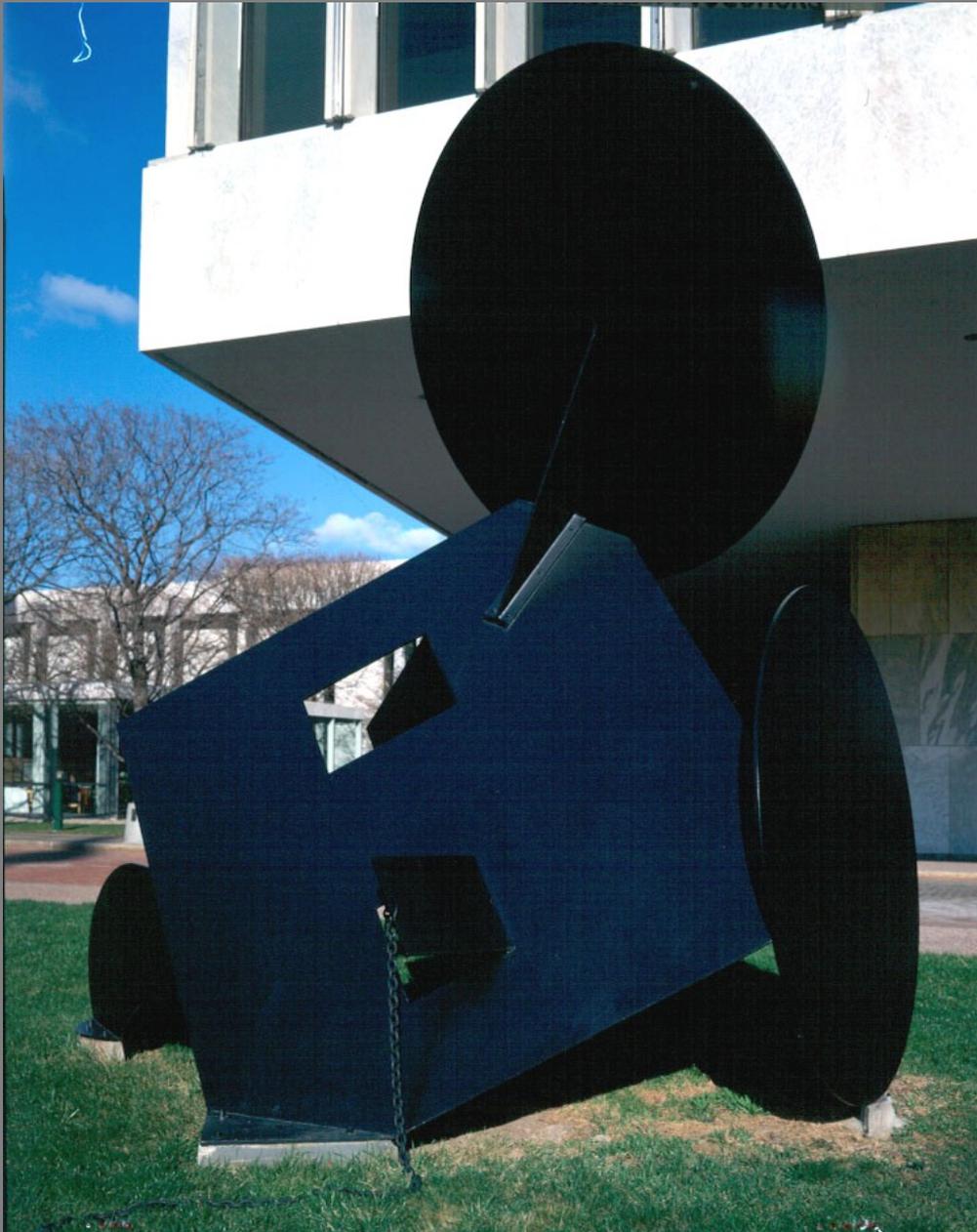


Image 4:
Claes Oldenburg,
Geometric Mouse,
Scale A, 1/6, 1969,
painted steel and
aluminum.

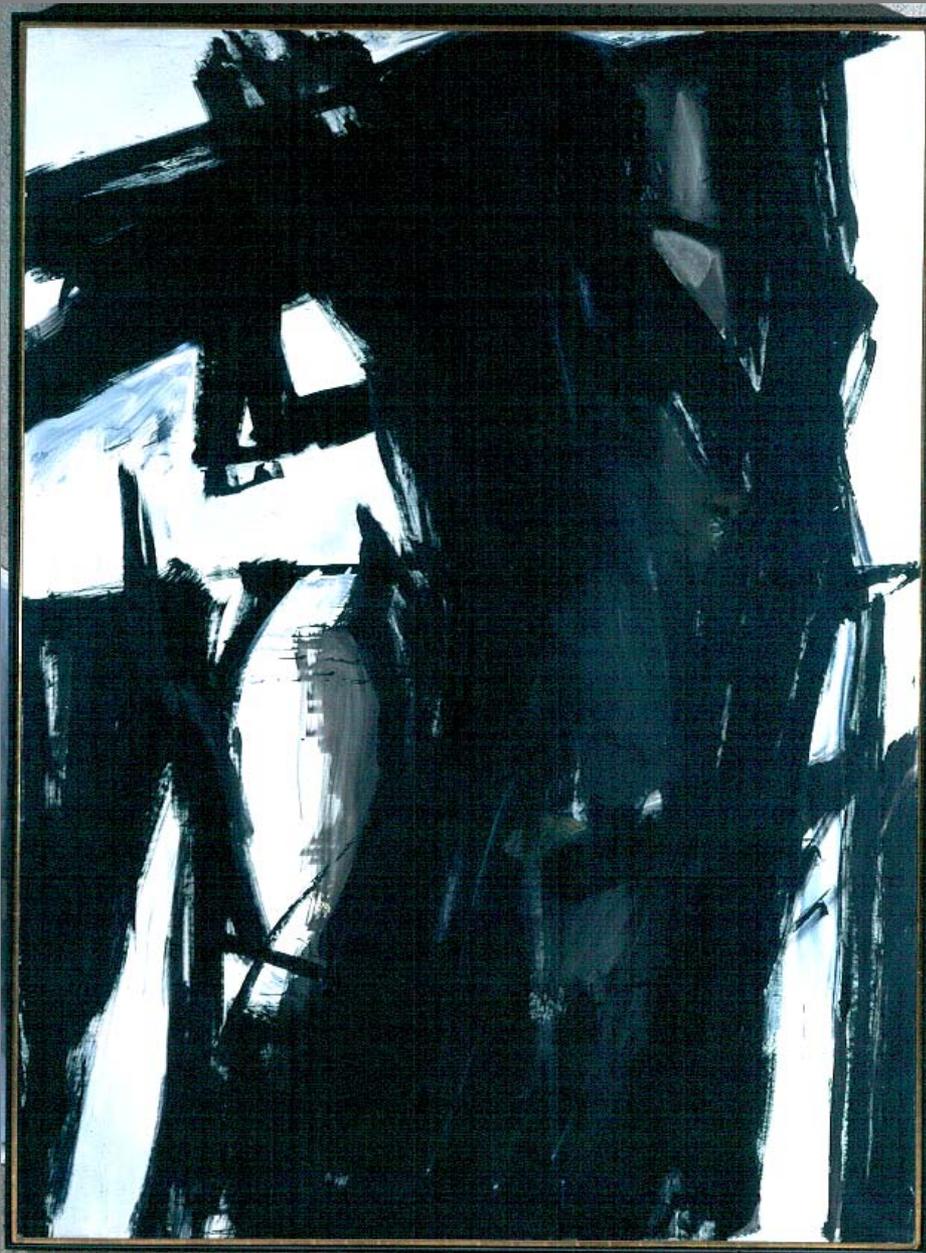
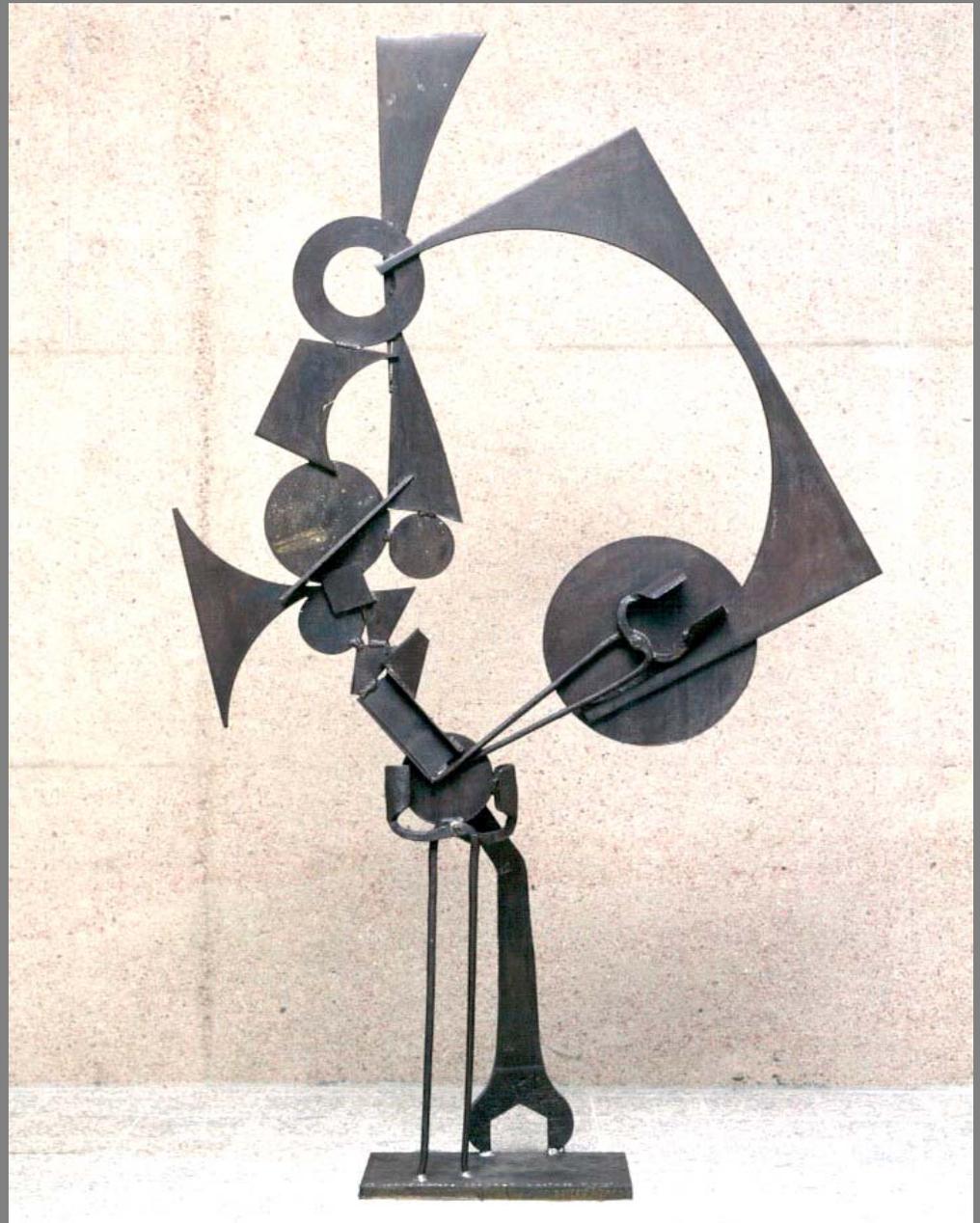
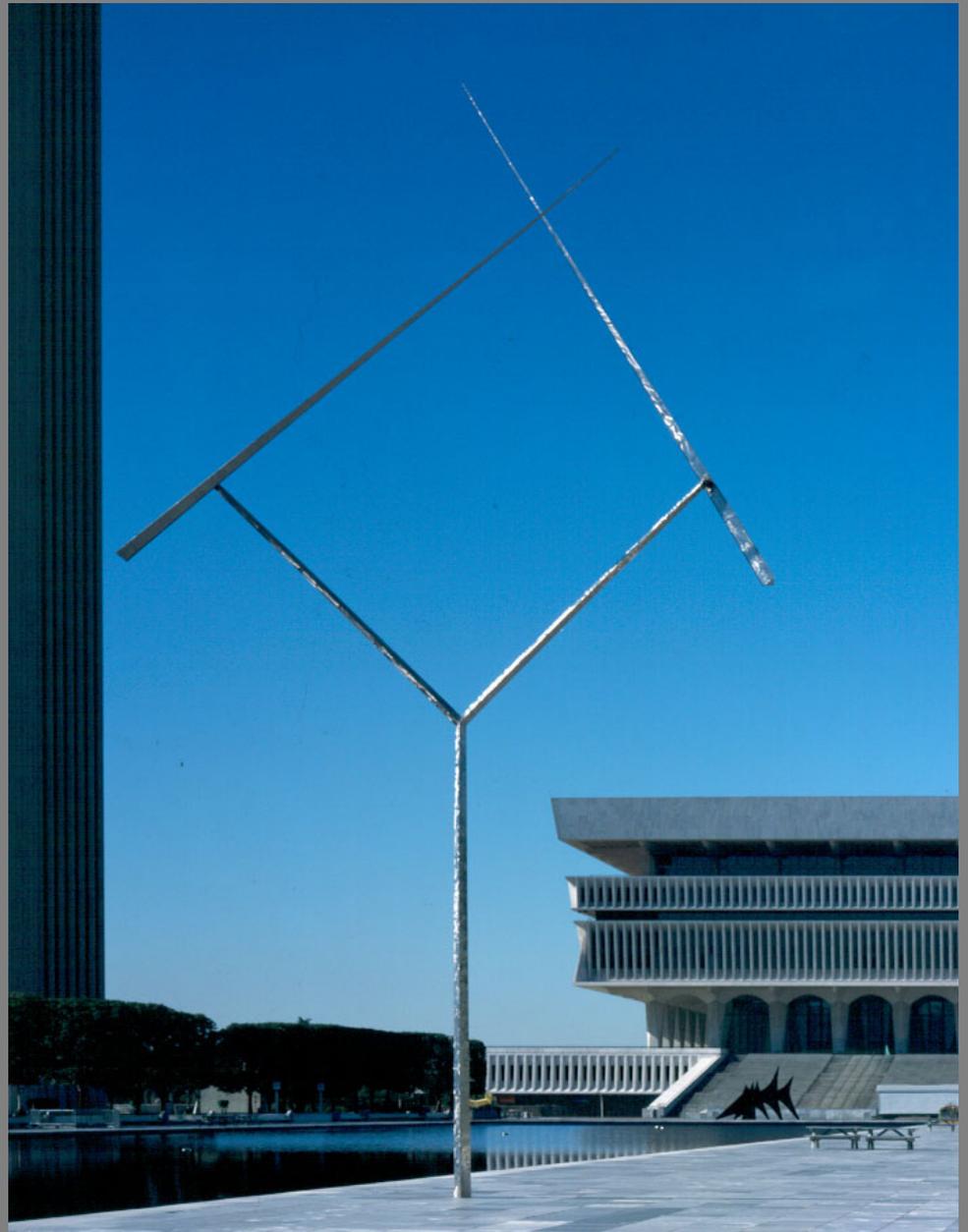


Image 5:
Franz Kline,
Charcoal Black and Tan,
1959, oil on canvas.

Image 6:
David Smith,
Volton XVIII, 1963,
painted steel.



George Rickey,
Two Lines Oblique, 1968-1971,
stainless steel.





Two Lines Oblique, view 2.



Two Lines Oblique, view 3.



Francois Stahly, *Labyrinth*, 1970-1971, teakwood.