

While collages per se are relatively scant within Willem de Kooning's oeuvre, a cutout mentality is often manifest, even within the conventional mediums of painting and drawing. The black and white images from the late 1940s, for instance, which confirmed his leadership among the Abstract Expressionists (works like *Painting 1948* [1948] in the Museum of Modern Art and *Attic* [1949] in the Metropolitan Museum) are built up from awkwardly interlocking and overlapping elements which seem almost like jigsawed shapes protruding from the picture plane. His figurally informed abstraction was tense with ambiguity, wilfully resisting formal wholeness or resolution. This dual sense of fragmentation and disruption, on the one hand, and shape-consciousness, on the other, touches upon corresponding aspects of the collage experience.

Willem de Kooning was born in Rotterdam in 1904 and emigrated to the United States in 1926. As a teenager he had apprenticed to a firm of decorators and subsequently took evening classes at the Rotterdam Academy. This grounding in both academic and craft technique was significant to his future development on two counts: it provided solid conventions to resist and break free of, but equally it placed him more directly in connection with European painterly tradition than his future American peers.

In New York in the 1930s de Kooning was part of a group of pioneering young modernists who steered a course between the prevailing regionalist and realist groups. He was closely associated with Arshile Gorky, John D. Graham and Stuart Davis, and later the photographer Rudy Burckhardt, and the poet-critics Edwin Denby [[link to cat. #](#)] and Harold Rosenberg. In 1938 he began his first series of portraits of women. That year, he met the painter Elaine Fried, whom he would marry in 1943.

De Kooning's return to figuration in the early 1950s with his violently expressive Woman series caused a considerable stir. Collage played a significant role in the evolution of these images as the artist cut voluptuous, suggestively open mouths of female models from cigarette advertisements and other sources to place, and animate, his painted faces. The emphasis on the mouth related to Surrealist preoccupations with this orifice.

Later work would to and fro between overt figuration and a painterly, gestural abstraction often rooted in limb-like forms and a fleshy palette. His brush handling recalls his apt saying that flesh was the reason that oil painting was invented.

Like Renoir, another devotee of paint as flesh, de Kooning turned late in his career to sculpture. His methods in sculpture were highly unorthodox and improvisatory, and on one occasion included the incorporation (literally) of the gloves he had been wearing during the sculptural process.