

By Eleanor C. Munro

Photographs by Rudolph Burckhardt

De Niro

works on a series of pictures



It is somehow humanly reassuring to note that, even in the present atmosphere of esthetic license, a painter still has, like his ancestors, to find his way through the barriers of his own spirit. Robert De Niro's semi-abstract paintings, composed of large, simple shapes and unshaded colors, have won him considerable notice. There are subjects and techniques in which he finds it easy to experiment. From a single sitting of a model, he may bring away dozens of drawings. He has painted, as he says, "inexhaustible" studies of Moroccan women, Anna Magnani, Garbo as Anna Christie and other themes which attract him. Yet, over the past five years, De Niro has time and time again bumped up against a stone in his channel, a subject which lies in wait, lures him on and then shipwrecks him. The subject is the Crucifixion.

De Niro is not unprepared to cope with such a problem. Years of study in academic and abstract painting lie behind him. Born in Syracuse, N. Y., in 1922, he decided at the age of five to be an artist. As a child, he studied at the Syracuse Museum School. He showed promise, and hard work brought him to the notice of his teacher, who encouraged him to join the adult classes. There he worked at charcoal drawings from life and from plaster casts, a discipline which is reflected today in his preference for working in front of the model—still-life or live. Every day after school, De Niro drew and painted in a private studio which the Museum finally turned over to him.

In the artist's studio stands a version of his troubling Crucifixion series, among other still-lives and portraits, to which he turned from time to time. Left, his palette, with a "still" from *Anna Christie*.



When he was sixteen, he began to experiment with abstract designs.

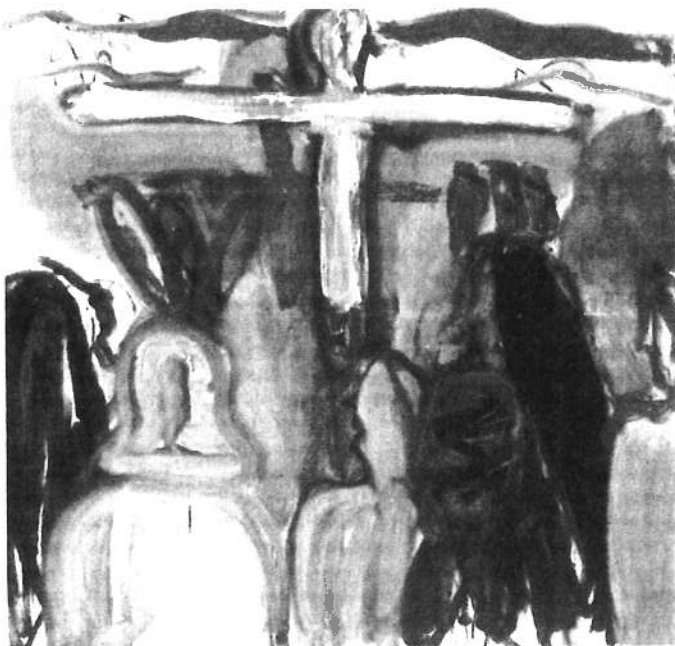
That year, he left Syracuse to find teachers who could help him develop his new interest. In Gloucester, he worked with Ralph Pearson. In Black Mountain—which until it closed recently offered young artists one of the most congenial apprenticeships in this country—he worked with Josef Albers. But Albers found his painting too Expressionistic and emotional. And De Niro, for his part, thought Albers' esthetic too restricted. For, during a previous summer at Provincetown and thereafter during several seasons, De Niro had studied with Hans Hofmann. Like so many of his contemporaries now exhibiting in New York, De Niro found in these classes an open door to the kind of art he liked.

In 1941, De Niro settled in New York, where he has lived ever since, moving occasionally from studio to studio. For five years, he worked as a guard at the then Non-Objective Museum, where Hilla Rebay's spectacular collection of Kandinskys hung. In 1946 he was given his first show at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery. From time to time since then, De Niro has supported himself by working in frame shops, or giving private lessons, teaching in a settlement school, giving a class at the Museum of Modern Art and, just recently, by painting commissioned portraits [fig. 6]. He is thus one of the few avant-garde painters to have made a success of that always tantalizing and frustrating problem, the non-academic portrait. As with his painting, in other things De Niro is inclined to fix on a project, then work hard to achieve it. This way, he taught himself to read French, though he has only rarely heard it spoken. Now he writes poetry in that language. Tennis, chess and, sometimes, metapsychology have been other pre-occupations. Versus "clubs," Isms and formulas, De Niro, who says he has several times turned his life upside down, now wants "peace and quiet" for his painting and himself. His studio, on the Lower East Side, seems to encompass both these elements of his life: paint



2 The artist at work on *Crucifixion I*: a series of lines incised with the brush handle trace the shifting forms.

Working back and forth between his various *Crucifixion* versions, De Niro kept trying to achieve a compositional scheme which satisfied him. One canvas, later destroyed, shifted from a centralized scheme [fig. 3] to a heavy plan of two crosses side by side [fig. 4].



3 *Crucifixion II*, Stage 1: broad, flat shapes are sketched in quickly on the bare canvas.



4 *Crucifixion II*, Stage 2: forms have been shifted back and forth, heavily overpainted.



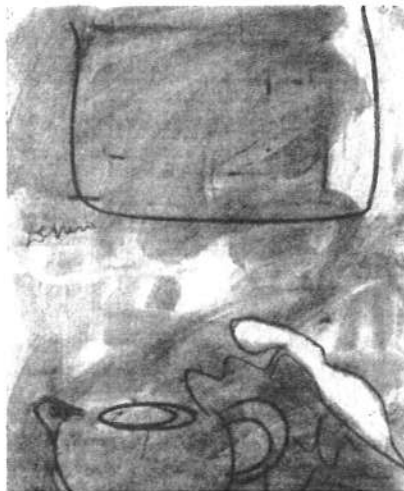
5 With a loaded brush, the artist freely draws in an outline form.

The type of composition De Niro works for is a simple arrangement of forms on a greyed ground [figs. 6-8], sometimes approaching a Chinese disposition of line and space [fig. 7]. In subjects like these based on a model or still-life arrangement, the artist says he can work "inexhaustibly."

De Niro continued

tubes, cans, pastel sticks and scraps of paper lie scrambled next to cold, white plaster walls. But here and there are islands of carefully arranged objects: on a table are a Classical head, a straw bottle, a pink shell and a fluted glass vase. On a wall hang reproductions of a greyed Corot river and bridge, an Archaic Kore, an Ingres drawing; a photograph of Garbo and one of some veiled Moroccan women. These are inlets where the eye lingers.

All these objects serve as models [figs. 7, 8]. Though at one time De Niro's work was completely abstract, he now always starts and ends with a clear subject. His process of working is akin to the Chinese way, or to Matisse's: that is, step by step he reduces and simplifies, not only the image, but his brushwork, the surface and the interior spaces of the canvas [figs. 10, 12]. He paints not to build up forms within the canvas, to activate the surface or the "push-pull" relationships that Hoffmann stresses. Instead, he swiftly draws his main image with charcoal on a stretched, pre-primed canvas, filling the space. Next he lays on large, flat areas of color. Then, returning to the canvas again and again over a period of weeks, De Niro will simplify, cover large areas with flat strokes of the palette-knife, scrape huge sections bare with a turpentine-soaked rag, and draw broad, outlined forms with one of his Rubens brushes [fig. 5]. He paints rather like a furniture mover: shifting whole objects to the right or left [figs. 3, 4], pushing a big form completely offstage, covering up a welter of detail by a cloth of pale, greyed color. He works in series, approaching a subject head-on and obliquely over three or four versions. Simplicity and logic of structure are what he aims for—a cool, controlled composition. As he proceeds with an oil, he may turn aside to make a spate of pen-and-ink drawings from another model. These he completes swiftly, using a Chinese bamboo pen, or perhaps charcoal. For emphasis, he may touch on a bit of pastel, or watercolor. Book after book [Continued on page 48]





12 *Crucifixion*, gouache, 1956

In one *Crucifixion*, De Niro brushed in the main forms [fig. 9]. He then simplified the three Marys into ghostly profiles [figs. 10, 11]. But this version, too, was destroyed. After five years' labor, only a single work, gouache [fig. 12], has achieved satisfactory coherence.



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of these quick studies pile up. Most end in the wastebasket. Perhaps ten out of a hundred, De Niro keeps for exhibition and his own use.

De Niro first tackled the Crucifixion subject in 1953. Why he did so, and whatever psychological reasons exist for his difficulties with it, are not within the scope of this article, except to note that the artist comes from an Irish-Italian family; and, at a fairly early age, he neglected the Church. This was the first time he had chosen a religious subject. It seemed just another image; he protests against any deeper meaning; nor has he even a clear knowledge of historical iconography of the Crucifixion. The three Marys who appear in several versions, and the Roman centurion whose golden helmet became a major compositional element, were, De Niro emphasizes, just images he vaguely remembered from pictures in museums. And in fact, they appear and then vanish like wraiths. One image, Christ alone—a black gash down the canvas' center, with shreds of red paint for blood, and white paint for cloth—strikes the cord which links the series.

Between 1953 and '57, De Niro painted about six gouaches and several oils on the Crucifixion theme, the first of which Meyer Schapiro selected for Gloria Vanderbilt's collection. But none of these satisfied him. In one canvas, he drew deep magenta crosses. Blue-green slashes of color defined the mourners. A gold, feather-like form rose up from the lower left: the helmet. Dark blue hills swept back from the close-up scene. But the whole canvas was scraped down to the bare bone. On a smaller field, De Niro introduced two soldiers playing dice below the cross, then obliterated them. "I was just stuck, that's all," says the artist. He would draw in large, ghostly profiles of the lamenting Marys, shift the profiles to the right and left, cover one with grey paint, replace it, then wipe out the whole composition and begin again. Of one oil version, he said, "It's like a tentative thing. The background is in a different style, or feeling, from the rest. The figures are painted one way and the ground another." At one time, the motif itself worried him: "The cross and figure is a stereotype . . . no emotional conviction behind it." Then a whole canvas looked like an indecipherable snarl: "It's just vagueness again. It's not clear and I can't stand that." A little later, De Niro brushed off the problem, claiming, "It's just a subject I haven't gone far enough with."

In 1956, after relaxing some of his tension by making hundreds of drawings on subjects suggested by a magazine article on Morocco, De Niro returned to the religious subject. But this was "the worst ever . . . nothing new . . . repeating an empty thing." Curiously enough, though De Niro realizes that a model before him, either a person or a still-life arrangement, seems to release his hand and his imagination, he never used one for these religious paintings. "I never do drawings of the Crucifixion. Maybe it's working without a model [that causes the trouble] . . . the figures are not figures." "Maybe," he said, "I could do more if I stood up and did drawings." But he never did.

Alone, of the entire Crucifixion series, one gouache [fig. 9] seemed to come under some kind of control. Of it, De Niro says: "Somehow it has feeling. Though some parts look confused, they aren't; they're felt. It's much better composed than the oils. It stays on a level." The gouache is, in fact, the simplest of all the series, and in this respect, it is closest to those other paintings to which he turned all the while, for relief and encouragement. Over the whole, rather complex ground, De Niro drew a grey film, translucent, encroaching upon the three upright forms of Christ and the thieves. Only vestiges of blue and red show through this grey cast, ghosts of the subsidiary images which he could never satisfactorily bring into adjustment in the other versions. Only a yellow smudge remains of the Roman helmet. With a heavily loaded brush, De Niro scored the arms and leg of the cross, and an oval for the suspended body. Black became just a fierce, wooden form, and the white cloth, a hard, abstract shape. In this gouache, structure had enveloped the subject.

Though the whole Crucifixion series was done with his eyes, as it were, turned inwards, De Niro recently began another, oblique attack on the religious theme by doing several Descent from the Cross studies; and for these, "I did look at reproductions to get ideas . . . Rubens, Veronese." One admires the persistence with which this artist, whose success in other avenues comes fairly easy, keeps worrying the knot. "I have to keep on and do it in a more subtle way," he says. The problem seems to be summed up, on the level of execution, as well perhaps as on a level of personal psychology, by De Niro's comment on one of those uncontrollable oils of 1955: "It's just too primitive in the worst sense."

For some of his fellow artists, primitive moods and motifs are a fertile ground for their art. Not for De Niro, who admires the *She Wolf* period of Pollock as against his later styles, the early Hofmann as against the "shouting" last ones; who thinks Balthus too morbid, and names Matisse

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...to both the artist and siter. His best works are his portraits says De Niro. "They have a certain elegance and sensual quality." At same time, he quotes Baudelaire's comment that the only good pictures are religious ones; all others are just commissions. De Niro's frustration with the Crucifixion series must be—in the broad, psychological sense Baudelaire intended—typical of every artist's, if not every man's, slow progress against his own devils. And, all the while, he must refresh himself by touching the ground of subjects free of paralyzing power: subjects for De Niro like a human face—Moroccan or Magnani—or the clear arc of a glass bowl.

Donatello continued from page 44

has been, and still is, notoriously difficult to fashion. The "facts" of his life, except for indications of physical whereabouts from year to year, remain virtually unknown. There is a parallel case in Shakespeare. Donatello's biographical personality yielded early to the mystique of his name. That name was put to a variety of uses according to the times. Already by 1500 and very probably during his own life time, it had begun to acquire a rich incrustation of the half-truths and non-truths of the kind a heroic culture tends to attract. In 1464, two years before his death, his "signature" was added to a group of statues which appear by the objective formation of archival documents to be only in part his own. Well before 1500 other statues in Florence were mythically ascribed to him as part of the complex game of politics in artistic reputation to which the Florentines have never been averse. Late in the sixteenth century, his well-known *George* for the niche of the Armorer's Guild on Or San Michele was the subject of an academic eulogy whose esthetic aims and even terminology Donatello would have had grave difficulty in understanding, to say nothing of approving; but the magic of the name carried it off. In the nineteenth century, to Hawthorne and his audience, Donatello's name became a symbol for a human counterpart of the ambivalent and threatening form partly animalistic and partly divine, symbolized by the marble Faun.

The mystique of the name has survived on over-optimistic museum labels into our own century. But our time, building on the pioneer work of the later nineteenth century, has in its own ways sought a more intact and deeper historical image than any other. True, Donatello's character was not (lack of data being an insuperable obstacle) *ex post facto* analyzed by Freud in the twentieth century, although a psychosexual approach to Donatello has been adumbrated in the Age of Kinsey. The profound twentieth-century concern for continuities in the realm of philosophy and physical science is more clearly indicated in the art-historical realm by Hans Kauffman's remarkable and fascinating study of 1935. This sought to project a new, totally organized image of the artist in the light of a continuation of medieval systematized thought. A timely corrective, equally modern in spirit, was provided by Ulrich Middeldorf in his extended review of Kauffman, a classic of its kind which today deserves a wider audience than ever. Here the approach tends away from the synthetic; though wide-ranging in humanistic scope, it is probing in detail, based on careful study of the object of art in all its ramifying connections rather than upon an *a priori* thesis; it is carefully selective, inductive rather than deductive.

Prof. Janson's approach takes cognizance of all this and of still more. On his title page and in his introduction he pays tribute to the memory of Jenő Lányi, the Hungarian scholar of Early Renaissance Italian sculpture who was tragically killed before his prime by torpedo action on his way to this country during World War II. Lányi may be thought of as an example of twentieth-century positivism; his "esthetic of scholarship," if we can use the term, was directed toward maximum clarity and order, the result so definite as to seem in its serried propositions to assume the form, in effect and means somewhat analogous to the Purism of Jeanneret. Lányi began his work on Donatello with an assembly of a vast corpus of bluntly informative photographs taken, for purposes of the closest kind of comparative study, under his direction over a period of years by Malenotti of the Florentine firm of Brogi & Laurati (which incidentally is the contributor of those photographs now available following the recent Janson publication). With the strictest objectivity Lányi began, in the light of the photographs, to re-study and re-interpret the documents. The ice logic was mingled with the fire of purpose to rediscover the "true" Donatello, divested of the half-truths which had grown up around the name. At his death Lányi left in published form several revolutionary revisions of earlier misconceptions in a series of articles of unequalled acuity. He left also over six hundred photographs, with some notes, but no manuscript for his projected book. It remained to Prof. Janson to undertake the finishing of the work. He completed the corpus of photographs by adding very nearly six hundred more, some made by Malenotti, others from different sources including the matchless work of the American scholar Clarence Kennedy. Then he wrote the text, *non ad narrandum, sed probandum*.

We are in debt to Prof. Janson not only for the